Toaru Majutsu no Index 2

"It's like this. A girl is imprisoned there."

Supernatural powers are recognized as an ordinary science in Academy City, and Misawa Cram School is the location to where the shrine maiden is. Also, it appears that the ringleader is someone from the magic side. Kamijou Touma was given this explanation by the magician Stiyl, to which he meekly nodded."

"Don't nod so easily like that. You're coming with me."

"...Huh!?"

Under the direct sunlight of midummer, the two people head towards the ominous building that stands towering over its surroundings.

Magicians, Deep Blood, Index, and Kamijou Touma. At the place where all the lines intersect, the story shall begin...!

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とある魔術の禁書目録②

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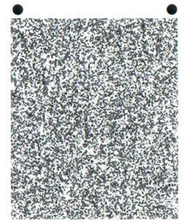

Kamachi Kazuma

It would be a 3-D artwork this time around.
However, it can be said that because these notes are fictional, even if one were to persevere, nothing can be seen. Things like people being able to see, perhaps, are the placebo effects. Let's do some psychic healing.

(Products of Dengeki Bunko)

Toaru Majutsu no Index

Toaru Majutsu no Index 2

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

Born on September 7, 1973. A troubled person whose patterns change on the mood at the time. Recently troubled badly about whether to buy a microwave oven or a HDD packaged with a DVD collection first.

カバー／あかつきBP

とある魔術の
禁書目録
インデックス
2
鎌池和馬
イラスト／灰村キヨタカ

“What!? What is that supposed to mean!?”

Nun managing the Index of Prohibited Books — **Index**

“Okay. Then I’m that.”

Unidentified shrine maiden — **Himegami Aisa**

High school student of Academy City — **Kamijou Touma**

“Don’t smile at everything. Are you ready to die?”
Magician — Stiyl Magnus

"We meet again, Index. I am most pleased to see you haven't changed."
Alchemist — Aureolus Izzard
"I-It can't be...Ars Magna?"

"Err, which part of you is a magic-user?"
"I'm a magic-user."

"You're going to cut off my right hand—!?"

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Toaru Majutsu no Index

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

2

Kamachi Kazuma
鎌池和馬
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Translators
Yen Press - Full Volume

PROLOGUE

Days Like Usual.

The_Beginning_of_The_End.

It was said that to understand someone, one just needed to look at their bookshelf.

"...A pile of manga."

The date was August 8th. Kamijou Touma had looked around the room, and found that he could not find any book that wasn't manga not only on his bookshelf, but also throughout the house. Thus, in order to save face, Kamijou Touma had decided to head to the train station of Academy City to buy some reference books.

...That was his intention.

"To think that one reference book costs 3,600 yen..."

Kamijou Touma muttered as if he just lost terribly in a great battle. And according to the shop attendant, all the reference books were sold at half price until yesterday in order to promote the summer exams.

(Such misfortune)

It was really unfortunate.

However, that was basically Kamijou Touma's everyday life.

Besides, he was a very popular guy simply because his friends felt that with him around, he could absorb all of their bad luck like a lightning rod.

Still, he couldn't just pack it in and leave after coming all that way.

Whatever the cost, he had to tear the manga-exclusive fantasies, his scarlet letter, off his bookshelf. It was abnormal. He didn't know if the notion of deducing someone's personality by what was on their bookshelves was based on science or superstition, but normal people wouldn't have put so much weight on such a trivial platitude.

However, Kamijou had serious cause to devote so much thought to the matter.

It was because Kamijou Touma had lost his memory.

Of course, it wasn't like he had forgotten everything. He didn't forget the meaning of the traffic lights, and he didn't forget how to use a cell phone.

What he had lost were his memories; his knowledge was still present.

It meant that even though he remembered how to use a cell phone, his mind began to wonder about things like "Eh? Where did I put my cell phone?" or "Hold on, since when did I get a cell phone?"

A person's knowledge is like a dictionary.

For example, one's knowledge may know that an apple was a fruit of the Rosaceae deciduous tree that bloomed in the spring and bore a ball-shaped fruit. However, one had to eat the fruit to decide whether it tasted good or not. That was because his brain didn't have a diary-like memory stating that he ate a delicious apple on a certain day.

He was told that the reason was because the episodic memory part of his brain that governs recollection, rather than the semantic memory part that governs information, was destroyed. However, that was not the main issue.

The problem was that Kamijou Touma wanted to know what sort of person he was before he had lost his memory.

Even if he had to follow that baseless explanation of understanding himself by checking his bookshelf.

However, he didn't come across as frantic or as if he was at the end of his rope.

He hadn't been dropped into the middle of the world all alone and wasn't caught in some intrigue where he was being hunted. For now, he had clothes, food, a roof over his head, and an acquaintance upon whom he felt he could rely.

"Touma!"

As he headed back home along the summer roads, ready to die from exhaustion at his unforeseen expense (in general, he considered any impulse buy over one thousand yen to be suicide), he heard her whine.

He turned to look, and indeed, there stood a single girl giving him a sullen, pouting face.

She was about thirteen or fourteen years old, and he could tell that she was a foreigner at a glance. Her waist-length hair was silver, and her skin was as white as snow. Her eyes were the color of emeralds.

However, what made one realize that she was a foreigner the most was her outfit.

She wore a Christian nun's habit that was pure white with gold-laced embroidery here and there. It managed to possess the characteristic look of an ostentatious teacup.

The girl's name was Index.

Of course, that wasn't her real name, but it was the name everyone seemed to call her by.

Kamijou met that girl in the hospital.

No, from Kamijou's perspective, he met her at the hospital, but it seemed that he had already met her before he lost his memories. However much he struggled to remember the girl, he couldn't recall anything about her. He wasn't about to reveal that, though.

On the day when he had first met the girl, she cried tears of happiness for Kamijou as she stared at him on the bed.

However, those tears were shed not for the current Kamijou, but for the pre-memory loss Kamijou.

Kamijou couldn't bear to break the happiness in the girl's heart. In order to protect the warmth in the girl, Kamijou Touma had to continue to act as if he had never lost his memories.

It was a complicated feeling...

It was as if Kamijou Touma had become two people.

However, the girl with the alias Index didn't seem to notice the conflict within Kamijou's heart (though to be fair, he didn't want her to realize it). From a position lower than Kamijou by a head, she looked up and stared unhappily at Kamijou.

"Touma, what could we have done with 3,600 yen?"

"...Don't say it."

"What could we have done?" she asked again.

Kamijou was about to repeat "Don't say it!" with more force before plugging his ears and shutting his eyes to escape from reality, when suddenly, he realized that she wasn't looking at him.

Curious, Kamijou stared at where Index was looking at, and found that the shop sign of an ice cream shop was spinning in front of him.

It was August 8th, and since it was a hot summer afternoon, there were evil-looking mirages floating above the asphalt, and Index's habit was long-sleeved and was most likely hot...

"...I understand your feelings, but isn't spending 3,600 yen on ice cream too much?"

"Hmph."

Index seemed to be unhappy with those words as she turned to look at Kamijou.

"Touma, I never said that I'm hot or that I'm about to get heatstroke. Of course I never thought of spending other people's money to satisfy myself, so I never thought of eating ice cream at all."

"...I know nuns don't tell lies, but you don't have to be so sweaty and give me those abandoned puppy eyes, right? Can't you just tell me that you want to eat ice cream in an air-conditioned room? The weather's so hot, yet you're still wearing that nun's habit that doesn't even consider the impact of weather. You may get heatstroke like that."

Though Kamijou sounded really generous, that was just him saving face. The amount of money in his wallet wasn't going to change. Of course, it didn't mean that he couldn't even buy ice cream, but if he did that, he wouldn't have enough money to take a ride back. Academy City was one-third the size of Tokyo, and to Kamijou, who had just recovered from a heavy injury, and the weak Index, it wasn't a place that could be trekked easily. Though the term "weak girls" may be a bit sexist, there weren't that many girls who could walk one-third the size of Tokyo.

However, Index seemed to be unhappy for some reason as she started to get even angrier.

She frowned and said, "Touma, this clothing is a materialization of God's protection; I never thought about it being hard to wear, being hot, being troublesome, or whether there should be a summer or winter version."

"...Right."

(Wow, honesty and kindness are two totally different things, huh?) reflected Kamijou in a bit of an adult-level epiphany. (And one more thing. Why are a bunch of safety pins stuck in that ridiculous habit?)

"Moreover, despite these clothes, I'm still in training. Alcohol and tobacco go without saying, but all other indulgences, like coffee, tea, and fruit-flavored dessert icicle pops are forbidden, too."

"Huh. I see. I figured feasting on ice-cream right about now would feel *really* good and be a totally in-season way to deal with this sweltering heat..."

People can't say anything when they're told something is for religious reasons.

Kamijou again stared at the signboard of the ice cream shop.

"Since that's the case, alright. It's not like we need to eat—"

Before Kamijou could finish speaking, a hand suddenly grabbed his shoulders at a sonic boom speed. Kamijou, unable to resist the huge force exerted by that girl's fingers, had to turn to face Index.

"I-it's true that I'm still in training and that I'm forbidden from having any kind of indulgence..."

"Then you can't, right?"

"But since I'm still in training, it means that I can't completely follow a saint's standards, right? So, in this situation, there might be a case where some ice cream accidentally went into my mouth. Isn't that right, Touma?"

"..."

He was about to make a witty retort, but her fingers dug into his shoulders even harder. Apparently, she didn't want him to say anything. What she didn't seem to grasp was that sometimes maintaining silence is more exhausting for everybody than allowing a comeback. It spoke to her inexperience.

At that moment...

"Hey, sorry to disturb you all in this important conversation, but who's that girl, Kami-yan?"

...A weird voice, speaking in a fake Kansai accent came from behind Kamijou.

When he turned, he saw something even more suspect. It was a man standing 180 centimeters tall, sporting blue hair and an earring. Even for a weirdo, he was far too strange.

(Was I really friends with this guy before my memory loss?)

Kamijou's people-related memories were entirely eradicated, so he had no clue.

(But anyway, your taste in friends sucks, Kamijou Touma!)

Kamijou cursed at himself as if he were a different person.

"Hm, what's up, Kami-yan? Why are you looking at me like you just saw a stranger? Did the summer heat cause you to lose your memories?"

“Wha—?”

Kamijou was shocked. Aogami Pierce, however, raised his hand and waved it about.

“I’m just joking, man~. This memory loss thing is a special privilege only to those unbelievable Denpa Otome[1], right?”

Aogami Pierce looped his arm around Kamijou’s shoulders (making him hotter in the process).

“...Hey, Kami-yan, who’s that girl? How do you know such a small girl? Is she your cousin...? Doesn’t look like it. Her silver hair doesn’t look like it’s inherited from your genes!”

The biggest problem with that guy was that his whispering was so loud that it wasn’t even a whisper.

Kamijou broke out in cold sweat, worried about whether the girl beside him would go crazy because of the word “small”... but luckily, it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“...From the way I see it, this girl should be only asking directions from you, right? But with your English still in country-isolation mode, that may be rather hard for you... Hold on, is that girl from an English-speaking country?”

Kamijou also didn’t know what he was talking about. And to Index, perhaps she was rather used to having others call her small. She seemed like she didn’t mind at all, only glaring viciously at the sun that was burning down. Maybe she was so hot that she didn’t want to say anything.

“...Speaking of which, Kami-yan, I don’t know where you met this girl, but it’s too soon to relax. I mean, we’ve been in the proven and trusted unpopular loser squad for sixteen years now. Don’t tell me you don’t know how big a contradiction it would be to trigger a ‘meeting with a normal girl’ event, right? It’s in romantic comedies and stuff. ‘The person you liked was actually a married woman with a baby face! Ahaha, your dreams have been crushed!’ Y’know, that kind of ending. Same thing, dude!”

Kamijou heaved a sigh of relief. It was a good thing it didn’t turn out like some overused rom-com plot.

At that moment, Aogami Pierce said, “Hold on, is it gonna be one of those endings where she turns out to be a cross-dressing trap? Isn’t ‘her’ chest a little too small?”

[1] デンパ少女 or Denpa Otome means “wave girl”. “Denpa” is a term to coin someone who has a really strange or eccentric behavior without any apparent reason, hence “the wave made me do it”; you might recognize the word as it is also the name of a novel, where the titular character is actually quite weird.

Immediately, Kamijou could swear he heard the blood vessels in the girl's head throb madly.

Kamijou forced himself to not make a blood-curdling cry.

It seemed like though the girl could endure being called small and young, but she couldn't take being called a boy.

Kamijou saw her barely maintaining her smile as she gnashed her teeth.

(Such misfortune...!)

Kamijou wanted to hold his head in his hands.

"Kami-yan, there's no way we—members of the proven and trusted unpopular loser squad—would ever meet a real-life 3D girl! So there's gotta be a crazy ending in store for you! I can see your future! It's the 18+ scene you've been waiting so long for. You remove her last piece of clothing, your hands quivering. Suddenly, you realize the truth, and you fall right out of bed in complete surprise! I can see it!"

"...You're joking, right? You actually understand, and that's why you're joking, right?"

"Eh? So she really is a girl? How uninteresting!" With a happy expression, Aogami Pierce said, "So your encounter must be abnormal, right? Kami-yan, though you're part of the loser squad, you can't just go around kidnapping little girls, you know? Such foolhardiness will spread across those image boards."

"Idiot... stop making such a joke! Who'd do such a thing!?" Actually, Kamijou didn't remember how he had met her. "This person right here is just a freeloader! Everything was done under negotiations on both sides, sergeant-dono!"

"Freeloader? Freeloader? Kami-yan, you just added a 'just' to an extremely precious 'freeloader girl'? Kami-yan! You're like an elementary school kid who just ate too many snacks and forgot the essence of rice!"

"Shut up! How can I express it except with a 'just'!? Since when can those romantic events happen so often in real life!? Do you have any idea what the Kamijou residence's wallet looks like because of her!? It would have been better off if a zashiki-warashi had rolled into my house instea—"

And then, after shouting eighty percent of that at the top of his lungs, Kamijou realized something.

Index, walking next to him, could obviously hear the whole conversation.

“.....Ah.”

Kamijou looked back with an expression of terror.

She was smiling. She was beaming so warmly her smile could have been that of the Virgin Mary herself. All the while, blue veins popped out of her face, reminiscent of a cantaloupe.

This wasn’t good. Kamijou wondered if his pre-memory loss self possessed the talent to coax Index into a good mood even when she was like this. If he had, then he seriously thought he had lost an important memory.

“Touma.”

Index spoke while revealing a perfect smile.

(It’s all over,) Kamijou thought, but he responded anyway.

“...What is it, Sister-sama?”

“I’m a nun affiliated with the Anglican Church. Repent now or forever hold your peace.”

The nun drew a cross in front of her chest, and clasped her hands together.

As the smile was too perfect, one could tell that it was an act.

Kamijou unknowingly wanted to clutch his head and cry out.

This was a bomb—no, it was an unexploded bomb.

(If I handle this carelessly, it may explode, and this will be the end of my life!)

Kamijou’s instincts were telling him that.

(What should I do, what should I do? Ah! That’s it, ice cream! Use ice cream to distract her!)

His mind at the very pinnacle of panic, Kamijou pointed stiffly at the automatic door at the entrance to the ice-cream shop, as if he had forgotten how to speak.

Index followed his finger, puzzled, and then stopped abruptly.

“Hmm...,” he heard her mumble.

Just as Kamijou heaved a sigh of relief, thinking that he had managed to divert her attention, he suddenly saw something.

There seemed to be a piece of paper on the automatic door.

The paper read:

We will be temporarily closed for renovation. We greatly apologize for the inconvenience.

With his mind thinking of a Bad End, Kamijou slowly turned to the girl beside him.

The girl's smile instantly vanished.

Kamijou didn't even have time to cry out, "Such misfortune!" before he was set upon by Index, the raging beast girl.

♦

In the end, they had a compromise and agreed on buying shakes from a cheap fast food restaurant.

Of course Index wouldn't be satisfied by that, so Kamijou had tried to use the incentive of being able to enjoy the food in an air-conditioned room to please her. However, the shop was actually crammed full in the afternoon.

"....."

Index looked unhappy again and remained silent. In her hands was a tray, upon which there were three shakes, one vanilla, one chocolate, and one strawberry. Though Kamijou really wanted to shout "Are you that thirsty?", he didn't dare to retort out of fear that his life would be at risk.

(Such misfortune,) Kamijou thought.

Index, whose mood had improved somewhat after getting three shakes for herself, was currently facing a tough situation where the shop was completely filled with customers. However, the weather was so hot that they couldn't just stay outside. They had finally managed to enter a shop with the air conditioning on, so who would want to go back to the streets to stand under the sun?

The nearby female high school students didn't seem to realize Kamijou's despair as they continued to talk about extremely ordinary topics.

"Yo, yo! I heard that Anzai used telepathy during the last exam! Is it true?"

"I heard that they even organized a teachers' meeting because of that, so it should be true. But I also heard that everyone at the meeting agreed that esper powers are a part of the curriculum, so it's not considered cheating."

“Ugh, that’s despicable! Nyaaa!! Then I want to use my power as well!”

“...Isn’t your power Pyrokinesis?”

“Can’t I just set fire to the teacher’s back and force him to spill out the answers?”

...That may not have sounded the faintest bit like normal gossip, but that’s how life in Academy City was. This was a single, large Ability Development organization, where all 2.3 million residents of the city were attempting to awaken some kind of supernatural ability within them.

Kamijou was one of those espers. He was the boy called the Imagine Breaker, with the right hand that had the ability to negate any supernatural power, even if it was a miracle of God.

“...Touma, I would like to sit down and take a rest by any means necessary,” stated Index. Her voice was absolutely devoid of emotion for some reason.

He was scared—scared of the nun’s eyes, which told him that she would bite him if he didn’t listen.

Kamijou shouted “Affirmative!”, and rushed to a shop attendant who was sweeping the floor.

“I see. I guess you’re going to have to share a booth with someone else, then, huh?”

The shop attendant merely revealed a cruel, professional smile and pointed to a corner by the window.

Share a booth? Kamijou looked over at where the finger was pointing.

“Urk!?”

Despite the restaurant being as full as a train station at rush hour, there was a single four-person table with free seats, like a black hole gaping wide in the crowd of people.

And over there...

...at the table...

...was a shrine maiden.

The shrine maiden was sleeping with her face down on the table.

Her shiny black hair was spread out like the tentacles of a beached jellyfish and completely hid her face.

(W-what's with this scenario?) Kamijou cried out deep within.

It was strange. It was too strange. His misfortune radar was warning him.

(Don't get involved with that. If you get involved, it will bring you misfortune for sure. Losing your memories has got nothing on this.)

Of course, Kamijou Touma was an unlucky person, but it wasn't like he wanted to be one.

He closed his eyes and made his decision.

(...Alright, let's go home! I'd rather get bitten by Index than get involved with such a person.)

Having made that conclusion, Kamijou turned back to look, and found that both of them had already disappeared.

"...?"

Kamijou looked around.

"...Ack!"

A different employee had suggested that Index share a table, and she was indeed already sitting directly across from the unfamiliar shrine maiden.

(Does she have no sense of danger? Or is she just that philanthropic? I don't even care, but seriously, Aogami Pierce, I'd like to ask, is the combination of a nun and a shrine maiden really amazing enough to make your eyes sparkle like that?)

He really wanted to run away.

But he couldn't. If he turned his back on Index and ran away, Index may leap at him like a lion and swallow him whole. Besides, it was too dangerous to leave the starry-eyed Aogami Pierce with the two girls.

But most importantly...

Index, sipping from her strawberry shake, was happily waving him over. Kamijou had a thought that he shouldn't wreck that expression.

Nonetheless, there was still a mysterious shrine maiden sleeping at the table.

Kamijou carefully approached the table. At that moment, the shrine maiden's shoulders jerked.

"I—"

Her mouth moved. The shrine maiden's mouth moved. Kamijou had a bad feeling. A very bad feeling. Why? Having lost his memories, Kamijou definitely couldn't remember anything, but he had a feeling that he experienced something similar before.

Kamijou gulped audibly and waited for the shrine maiden to speak.

And she did.

"—I binged."

CHAPTER 1

The Fortress of Glass.

The_Tower_of_BABEL.

Part 1

It was a windowless room.

There were no doors, no stairs, and no elevators or hallways. This "building"—which served none of the functions of one—was an impenetrable citadel, accessible only by a Level 4's teleportation ability.

A single magician stood within this Calculate Fortress that had strength which easily surpassed that of a nuclear shelter.

His name was Stiyl Magnus.

Stiyl, who was well-versed in runic magic, especially flame magic, was also an Anglican priest. At the young age of fourteen, he was an exception among exceptions: an expert at using magic to kill magicians.

Normally, he was not someone who should have been here.

That didn't refer to the building, but to the city as a whole. He was one of the members of the 0th Parish of the Anglican Church, Necessarius. Right now, he was within the borders of the completely anti-occult Academy City, a factory for the mass production of espers via drugs, biostimulation, and sleep learning.

His current presence there was as unnatural as mixing a tarot card into a poker deck.

However, there was a reason he was in this place he shouldn't be.

He was currently acting as a representative of the Anglican Church to negotiate with Academy City on equal standing. However, considering he was representing an organization, his personality was possessed of a striking flaw.

He was a man who would kill without hesitation.

He wouldn't even twitch an eyebrow at setting a living being awash with flames.

"..."

Despite that, though, he would never grow accustomed to the sight before his eyes, no matter how many times he witnessed it.

The space was too large to be called indoors, and there were no sources of illumination, but the room seemed to be filled with starlike lights. That was because all four walls were covered with innumerable monitors, buttons, and other such things, each blinking on and off. From the thousands of different machines of various sizes came tens of thousands of cords, cables, and tubes, all sprawled across the floor like arteries, gathering in the area at the center of the room.

There was a huge cylinder in the middle of the room.

It was four meters in diameter and over ten meters in height. The cylindrical container that was made of reinforced glass had red fluid inside it.

It was said that this color represented a weak alkaline culture solution. Of course, to Stiyl, scientific concepts were well removed from his own field as a magician.

A human wearing a green surgical gown was floating upside down inside the beaker.

There were no words to describe him except "human". The silver-haired "human" looked both masculine and feminine, both childlike and aged, and both saintly and sinful.

Was this person a superposition of every human possibility or had they abandoned them all?

Either way, the one thing that could be certain was that only the word "human" could describe him.

"Every man and woman who comes here has the same reaction when they observe my state of being..." began the submerged "human". He sounded both masculine and feminine, both childlike and aged, and both saintly and sinful. "...but there really isn't a need for humans to go out of their way to do what machines can."

In other words, that was how this "human" existed.

One could compensate for all biological activities using machines. Therefore, there was no meaning in doing those things yourself. The outer limit of humanity, with an estimated lifespan of 1700 years, was staring Stiyl in the face.

Stiyl felt fear.

He wasn't scared of Academy City's scientific prowess and how it could replace all human biological processes with machines. What made him tremble was this human's very perspective—the willingness, the lack of hesitation to abandon their flesh and give their life over to machinery just because they could.

The thought of a "human" warped to that extent was what frightened him so intensely.

"I suppose you know why I called you here..." The board chairman of Academy City, the "human" Aleister who was floating upside-down, said with a stern tone, "...but the situation has become complicated."

Stiyl frowned at that. He couldn't have imagined the human before him would complain about something "troublesome."

"Would you be referring to Deep Blood?"

Stiyl, who normally neglected honorifics, used them with Aleister.

He wasn't doing so because of his position as a representative of the Church. It was because he knew that if Aleister felt even a moment's hostility toward him, he would tear him to pieces before he could blink. It didn't matter if Stiyl himself had any hostility. A simple misunderstanding or misinterpretation on Aleister's part could cost Stiyl his life.

That was because he was in the main base of the enemy, the command center of 2.3 million espers.

"Hm." Noticing Stiyl trembling, Aleister said, "If it were just an esper, there wouldn't be a problem. *It* was one of the espers originally in my possession. If it were an incident caused in this city, by this city's residents, there would be 70,632 ways to deal with it and cover it up..."

"..."

Stiyl didn't really have any particular thoughts on the matter. He wasn't really interested in what emergency procedures Academy City had, nor would he understand this world of science if it was explained to him anyway.

"...What has complicated matters is that one of your people has taken part in this when he shouldn't have."

Therefore, Stiyl focused his thoughts on that one point.

Deep Blood. He knew the name not from Academy City's Bank, but from a record in the British Library. From the wording, one could imagine that it was used to kill "a certain creature" whose very existence was uncertain. Both the details of the ability and its authenticity were unknown. At any rate, he had only heard that there lived a young woman named Deep Blood.

The girl in possession of the Deep Blood ability was currently imprisoned by a magician.

That one piece of information encapsulated the incident.

“Hm. Since this enemy is from outside Academy City, this has gotten somewhat troublesome.” Aleister explained, continuing to be upside down. “It isn’t like it would be difficult for a city with the strength of more than 2.3 million espers to crush one or two magicians. The main issue lies elsewhere: If we do that, it would mean that our people killed one of yours.”

Academy City and Necessarius each controlled their own worlds.

Things were the way there were right now because each of them had complete control over its own art: the scientific and the occult. If Academy City, which controlled espers, declared that they had defeated a magician, the people on the Magic side wouldn’t sit back and do nothing.

For example, if a fighter jet with the latest technology crash-landed in enemy territory, the wreckage may reveal the secret technology.

“I suppose that means it would be difficult for you to request reinforcements, then,” said Stiyl in an uninterested tone.

A combined force of espers and magicians could spark conflict for the same reason. There might be struggles over who would lead the team, because it would be easy for one side to steal the other’s technology under the pretense of ascertaining their combat abilities.

That raised another question. Two weeks ago, Stiyl had come to Academy City and had a battle with an esper. Why had that battle been allowed and overlooked? There might have been some deal made between Academy City and the Church that he wasn’t privy to. Or maybe because that boy was viewed as a Level 0 with very little importance.

The current case, however, was different.

The espers and magicians involved in this turmoil were all important people, and all of them had great power.

“I see. So that’s why you specially asked me, an ‘exception’, to be here.”

Stiyl’s expression didn’t change. He said that just to affirm the facts

In other words, Stiyl Magnus was an exception. There would be a problem if a magician was killed by an esper. However, there wouldn’t be any problem if Stiyl took down a magician, since he was one himself. And when he gave a thought to his superiors, he knew they would probably want to deal with their own embarrassment by themselves.

They wouldn't consent to anything unless someone from the Church dealt with the magician.

"This is a blueprint of the battlefield in question."

It was unknown what technology was used as an image suddenly appeared in the darkness.

It was a wireframe-like drawing done in CG. It displayed a sketched map of a completely normal building which would be the field of battle this time.

The words "Misawa Cram School" were written in a trim font on the edge of the sketch.

"We've analyzed its interior using satellite imagery, as well as its construction blueprints." Aleister's voice didn't have any cadence in it. "Whether there are any sort of magical traps inside is unknown. It's outside my field, after all."

"..."

"This Misawa Cram School has a somewhat unique background."

Aleister explanation went like this.

Academy City had always been a large teaching establishment that gathered hundreds of schools of all sizes into one place. Among its Curriculum, it included the esper development program.

Misawa Cram School was a prep school with locations all over the country. The original reason a branch of it had been placed in Academy City was more than likely so it could be used as a giant corporate spy to *steal the city's teaching techniques.*

Unfortunately, Misawa Cram School dabbled only halfheartedly in esper development and came under bad influence. In what could be referred to as Science Worship, they have been enslaved by the cultlike idea that they were the "chosen ones" for being the only people who knew about esper development.

Eventually, the city's branch school even started to ignore the orders of the Misawa School Group and ran amok. As a result, it had ended up taking the girl named Deep Blood prisoner in accordance with its "teachings."

"But why did Misawa Cram School imprison Deep Blood? Does their doctrine contain the objective of sacrificing themselves to the descendants of Cain in order to achieve immortality, like some sixteenth-century cult?"

"No. Misawa Cram School has no particular fixation in possessing Deep Blood. I suspect they would have done the same thing to any esper whose power was unique and couldn't be reproduced."

"?"

"Levels in Academy City are decided by academic and supernatural ability. Thus, they wanted to take the Deep Blood and examine her. If they were to announce that they can mass-produce an amazingly rare ability, it could effectively bait in Level 2s and Level 3s, since they usually have a complex regarding their own more widespread abilities... Good grief, it's impossible to change an already-awakened ability into a different one, even with a brain transplant."

However, that also sounded strange to Stiyl. Even if having a rare ability granted status in Academy City, how could anyone in this science-ridden place believe in something like the occult *creature* in question?

As Stiyl questioned it, Aleister answered him casually, "In any case, if you acknowledge the value in the power's rarity, the story makes sense. There are plenty of other espers with unidentified abilities, not the least of which is Imagine Breaker, as well as espers who have never had the opportunity to show the true extent of their power in combat because of their enormous power."

Anyway, things would be easy if it was just Deep Blood being imprisoned. Like what Aleister had said, if there were internal conflicts in that city, there were 70,632 ways to deal with it.

But that wasn't the problem.

It was because before the problem was settled, a magician had come in from the outside world and entered Misawa Cram School seeking Deep Blood. On top of that, he didn't destroy Misawa Cram School, but hijacked it. So things became that complicated.

"..."

Stiyl silently gazed at the map of the school building.

He couldn't tell how much of i had been magically "remodeled". He felt nervousness run down his spine a bit. It was the sort he got when he was blindly diving into a situation he couldn't predict. While the sensation was familiar to him, it didn't feel good. It only meant that a battle of life or death, of zero or one, was inevitable.

However, the city had a combat potential of 2.3 million espers. The thought that he'd be alone for such a fight was a little enjoyable.

"Not quite," Aleister said, seemingly seeing through what Stiyl was thinking. Perhaps there was a device in the room that could read a person's thoughts through temperature or blood flow. "Lest you forget, I am in possession of an esper who is a natural enemy of your people."

Stiyl froze immediately.

Imagine Breaker. The boy who had fought a battle of life and death against Stiyl two weeks ago. It was the name of a unique boy, one which implied something beyond the realm of common sense and possibly beyond even the realm of the strange. Any supernatural power; not just magic, but esper powers and the systems of God, would be negated on contact with his right hand.

“But didn’t you say that you can’t use espers to beat magicians?”

“You don’t have to worry about that.” Aleister said in a tone as if he had memorized it. “Firstly, he’s a Level 0, so he doesn’t carry any valuable information. Even if I let him go work with you, there’s no fear that he’ll leak information on our secrets.”

“…”

“Secondly, he doesn’t have the intelligence to understand your techniques. Therefore, none of your information would leak to us if he acted in conjunction with you, either.”

(That old fox...)

For the first time, Stiyl felt a grudge toward Aleister.

He couldn’t discern that human’s intentions. He understood from experience, down to the very marrow of his bones, that Imagine Breaker was *far* from useless.

It was true that the workings of Imagine Breaker wasn’t something that could be understood with just one or two looks, and Stiyl definitely couldn’t steal that technology and bring it back to the Church. However, it should be the same for Academy City. No, at least Stiyl hoped that it was the same for time. If Academy City had a way to duplicate that Imagine Breaker ability, the Church wouldn’t have any existence. Even sacred treasures from a millennium ago would be destroyed on contact with his right hand.

But Aleister didn’t seem to be treasuring that precious Imagine Breaker at all.

It was like he was giving a saint in training all sorts of trials.

It was like using a heavy hammer to strike heated steel to forge a sharp and powerful sword.

“…”

And more importantly, that boy had the knowledge of 103,000 grimoires at his side. Was that really alright?

Aleister's true intent and spoken intent were at odds with each other. Stiyl harbored doubts about it deep in his heart, but didn't let it show on his face.

He took caution to disallow it. He didn't want even the slightest bit of trouble coming to that girl.

"...Deep Blood."

Stiyl muttered. His expression was like a scholar who had found something that he was unable to explain.

"Does Deep Blood really exists? If it does, that means—"

Stiyl was unable to continue on.

Deep Blood. If that existed, then that certain creature that it must kill must also have existed. In other words, if he believed in the existence of Deep Blood, it meant that the existence of that certain creature was a fact.

"Hm, the occult is more your domain than ours, I think. But, even your world has to admit that something that truly defies common sense exist, right?"

(Of course,) Stiyl cursed in his heart.

The magic power that magicians used could be described as something like gasoline. In other words, their lifespan and life force were crude oils from which it was created, while the user's breathing, blood flow, and meditation were what refined it into an easily usable source of gasoline.

That's why magicians weren't all powerful. No matter far one made it in his pursuit of magic, the amount of gasoline was finite.

However, that creature didn't have such a limitation.

This certain creature had the ridiculous characteristic of being immortal, which meant that they had infinite magical power. *Even in spite of the fact that the very resources of the planet seem limitless but still have a bottom.*

The descendants of Cain—vampires.

They weren't the simple things from children's stories that could be dealt with by a cross or the sunlight. Just one of them could present a threat to the entire world rivaling that of nuclear bombs.

"Hm."

The human upside down in the giant container looked at Stiyl disinterestedly.

Do you know why what we call esper powers exist in the first place?"

"...No."

There was no reason Stiyl would have known, nor did he think Aleister would tell him the truth. Granting confidential information to an enemy would mean he'd have to abandon all hope of leaving this place alive.

"Actually, it's just a *blur* in one's cognition," Aleister said casually, "Have you heard of Schrödinger's Cat? It's the most famous tale of animal cruelty in the world."

"...?"

"I'll omit the detailed account but in short, it implies that the nature of our reality is to distort itself to align with the thoughts of the one observing it. Although, the microscopic and macroscopic laws of physics also differ so it's not a general rule."

In this world, the laws of physics can be seen as microscopic and macroscopic. Just where did the "tiny" world end and the "huge" world start? It was said that those were also within Aleister's range of research.

"...I am having difficulty understanding what you mean."

"It's alright, you don't have to. If you did, I would be forced kill you right now," Aleister nonchalantly said. "...Though even I do not understand it. The existence of Deep Blood is more than likely a mere trifle, just like the cat inside the box."

Aleister explained that an esper was like a piece of litmus paper that had changed color.

The main point wasn't to marvel at how the litmus paper changed color from red to blue, but to consider why, what's the reason behind it, and think if there was any way to manipulate that rule. Even with the power of 2.3 million espers at their disposal, and despite that potentially being enough to take on the entire world, this human was actually claiming that it was all just a means to an end.

Stiyl was trembling.

The human in front of him was someone who would assert that there is no reason for a person to do what a machine can.

But just what exactly was *machine*...

...and what was *human* to this man?

“However...”

The “human” spoke.

The “human” that looked both masculine and feminine, both childlike and aged, and both saintly and sinful made an expression which could be considered a smile, and said, “Well, then. If Deep Blood proves the existence of vampires, then I wonder, just what does Imagine Breaker prove?”

Part 2

Kamijou Touma was at a loss for words.

He was currently in the completely full nonsmoking area on the second floor of a fast-food restaurant. He was sitting at a four-person table in the corner by the window with Index and Aogami Pierce.

(Hm, so far so good.)

“—I binged.”

(But why is there a shrine maiden lying on a table in such a crude shop and actually saying such ridiculous words!?)

The shrine maiden was about as old as Kamijou and was wearing a typical red-and-white shrine maiden outfit. The waist-length black hair made her look like a textbook example of a shrine maiden.

“...”

“...”

The heavy presence was like that in an elevator.

(What should I do?)

At that moment, Kamijou suddenly noticed Index and Aogami Pierce staring at him.

“...W-what is it?”

“...Kami-yan, when someone talks to you, you should oblige and reply, right?”

"...That's right that's right! Touma, you can't just back away on just seeing the appearance. The hand of God's salvation extends to all humankind. Amen."

"...What, no! Are you joking!? We should at least settle this by rock-paper-scissors to make it fair! Wait, Index, you already assumed I'd lose, didn't you? Quit making that docile face and crossing yourself!"

In the end, the trio had decided to play rock-paper-scissors to decide the martyr.

Rock, rock... and scissors. Kamijou lost.

In conclusion, Kamijou Touma really was misfortunate.

He held his scissors out there by themselves, still in disbelief. For now he attempted an "Umm, excuse me?" to the shrine maiden face down on the table. Her shoulders gave a start. He made up his mind that he'd bring up a safe topic first.

"Ah, erm... what did you mean when you said you binged?"

(It's best to maintain a natural conversation. Since that shrine maiden did say that, she's probably hoping someone would ask her why.).

"I had a lot of discount coupons. One hamburger for 58 yen."

"Uh huh."

With no memories to speak of, Kamijou was oblivious to what a hamburger tasted like. He did have knowledge, though, and it explained that it was an emergency food meant for those low on cash and that it was just a flat piece of meat and some wilted lettuce on a bun.

"So I went ahead and ordered thirty of them."

"You were being too economical, stupid."

Kamijou retorted on reflex. Right then, the shrine maiden ceased any and all movement. Her silence tipped him off to a somber aura emanating from her body, like she had been very hurt by it.

Awkward. He had not expected her to react to his perfectly honest words and because of that the atmosphere had become super awkward.

"Ah, I didn't mean it like that. What I meant to say was, 'That's stupid, but why would you do something like that?' I just meant to make the conversation go smoothly, so it ended up sounding rude, and, well, you know, sounding rude is a sign of affection, and definitely not one of malice, and also, to the nun and the blue-haired guy, I'd like to see you outside for a moment later, quit looking at me like that!!"

Unable to withstand the silence, Kamijou started to shout crazily.

“I ate my emotions.”

She made that declaration abruptly, deathly still.

“Huh?”

“Train fare back home, four hundred yen.”

The heap of shrine maiden replied, sighing. Kamijou forced himself to absorb her words. Though he didn’t remember ever having been on a train, he did possess the knowledge that the train and bus fare in Academy City was expensive.

“What does four hundred yen for a train ride back have to do with your meal?”

“My total fortune, three hundred yen.”

“...And the reason is?”

“Overspending, lack of planning.”

“...”

“So that’s why I stuffed myself.”

The word “stupid” made its presence known in his throat again, but he just barely managed to force it back down.

After careful consideration, he said, “Wait, why didn’t you just ride the train with that three hundred yen? Then you would only have to walk for about one hundred yen’s worth. And besides, can’t you borrow the fare from someone?”

“—That idea’s good.”

“Why are you staring at me like that? Wait, don’t turn your expectant look to me!!”

Kamijou frantically let his body back away from the shrine maiden as much as possible. He had already spent 3,600 yen on that (useless) reference book. On top of that, he had even bought three shakes just to calm Index down. It was honestly an inconvenience to spend any more, even if it was just one hundred yen.

But aside from that...

The shrine maiden was showing her face for the first time since they arrived. Contrary to his expectations, she was extremely beautiful.

She was a little different from the foreigner Index. She had the white skin of a Japanese person which was even more visible thanks to her darkly colored eyes and hair. Though her eyes looked sleepy and devoid of energy, it also meant that she was not aggressive. She seemed strangely openhearted, even, like it would be safe to get as near to her as he wanted.

Then...

"....."

Index scowled and glared at him.

"Y-you're kidding. Kami-yan's actually talking to a girl... to actually be talking to a girl he just met for the first time... it can't be true!"

Aogami Pierce was angrily grumbling, truly attempting to ruin Kamijou's reputation.

"Shut up, Aogami Pierce! Public service announcement, please come to the gymnasium later! Also, shrine maiden, supply yourself with the one hundred yen you need and then go home immediately! That's all, briefing over!"

"What do you mean? Kami-yan, I'm not done talking yet! For a man who has been in the group of dejected losers for sixteen years, how did you become acquaintances with girls of such unique attributes like a nun and a shrine maiden within two weeks!? What? What kind of galge is this, sensei?!"

Aogami Pierce cried out in confusion and Kamijou truly desired to reward him with a punch. However, as they sat diagonally, he could not do so. Just examining the positions of their seats was enough to see how misfortunate Kamijou was.

"One hundred yen please."

She had a difficult expression, like she was worrying about something, and then she raised her face.

"No?"

"No. I can't lend you what I don't have."

"..." The shrine maiden pondered for a while and said, "...So stingy. Won't even lend a mere one hundred yen."

"...You're the one not even carrying one hundred yen, stupid," responded Kamijou hotly.

"Kami-yaaan, how can you respond like that so naturally? As one who has the fate of being in the group of dejected losers, you should be totally nervous and not even able to give her and answer! As a member of the loser squad, it's your destiny!!"

Aogami Pierce sounded like he was struggling to crawl up out of the depths of hell.

"...Beauty."

The shrine maiden's eyes waved, causing one to wonder what she was thinking about.

"Lend me a hundred yen since I'm beautiful."

"Geh! Shut up, you terrible woman! A witch who uses her face to get money is not called a beauty! Besides, I already had to buy three milkshakes for no good reason, so I don't have any money left!"

"Th-thank goodness, Kami-yan. You still believe that all beautiful women have kind hearts, so can I take that to mean your 2D nature is still alive?"

"...In other words, Touma. If you didn't get me these shakes you would have handed her one hundred yen and settle the issue. That's what you're saying, right? Hmph."

The stares and cries of outrage began to surface and they far surpassed Kamijou's computing abilities.

Kamijou grabbed his head, wondering which point he should settle first. Index, chomping on the straw of her milkshake with enmity, shot the shrine maiden an inimical gaze.

"Hmph. Seeing that you're wearing red hakama, I can see you're of the Urabe style. Do Urabe priestesses even use their looks to get by? You know, I think the term 'shrine maiden' used to be slang for 'prostitute' during the Heian period."

Kamijou couldn't help but sputter at that one. For now, he figured he'd get Aogami Pierce to shut up. He seemed to be extremely excited; his eyes were practically shouting, "Ahaha! This is great! A battle between a western nun and an eastern shrine maiden!"

"I'm not a shrine maiden."

"What?"

Everyone at the table stopped and stared at the black-haired girl. She looked like the picture that would be in an encyclopedia under the entry for shrine maiden.

“Eh, if you’re not a shrine maiden, what are you?” asked Kamijou, like he was somehow the group leader.

“I’m a magic-user.”[2]

“.....”

Everyone sank into silence. The sounds of the cable broadcast in the shop seemed like miles away.

(Wait, what? I’ve lost my memory, but for some strange reason, I feel like this has happened before. That’s what it feels like. But why is Index shaking like that, is she about to explode!?)

Index slammed onto the table with both hands.

Before the shakes on the tray could even spin around and fall over, Index roared, “What kind of magic-user? Kabbalah!? Enoch!? The School of Hermes, Mercurius’s Vision, or Modern Astrology!? Don’t just declare yourself something as vague as a magic-user and tell us your specialty, school, magic name, and order name, stupid!”

“???”

“You can’t call yourself a magic-user without even knowing all that! Besides, you’re an Urabe-style shrine maiden, right? At least brag about being an oriental astrologer from the Onmyoudou!”

“Okay. Then I’m that.”

“What!? What the heck is that supposed to mean!?”

Index slammed both her hands on the table for a second and third time.

Kamijou sighed and took a look around. Though the shop’s interior was bustling, it could be said that Index’s fit of rage was a little too much. He had to settle her down and fast.

“Okay, fine, the shrine maiden is a magic-user. We get it so quiet down for a sec—”

“Wha-!? Touma, your attitude is clearly different from when you first met me!”

Index glared at him like she was about to bite off his head. The reality was that the memoryless Kamijou had truly forgotten about his past. He couldn’t just say he didn’t recall it, even if she was wrong.

[2] The term used here is a generic word for anyone who can use magic rather than a proper magician.

“She said it herself, so isn’t that enough? Jeez. She’s not doing any harm to anyone, and she’s not trying to trick us, so leave it alone.”

“...Ugh, when I wanted to prove that magic was real, my clothes got stripped off.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing! I didn’t say or think anything!!”

Index jerked her head away from him in a huff. It didn’t matter, but under the table, his foot was being smashed into the floor by something. Okay, it did matter. There was only one culprit here, no matter how you thought about it.

“Ah.”

Index, who had turned her head aside, seemed to notice something.

At first, he wondered if it was an employee finally deciding to walk over to give them the red card and kick them out for making such an uproar.

(Hm? ...People?)

The moment he questioned it, *he finally caught onto the fact that approximately ten people had surrounded their table.*

“...”

Kamijou wondered why he didn’t notice them until now.

Even though there were ten strong staring at them intently at a distance a waitress might stand at to take their orders, all crowded around their one table, he hadn’t been able to notice they were there.

And...

Even now, he saw that not a single other customer in this packed restaurant had realized anything was wrong.

In other words, they had concealed their presence *just that much*, like assassins.

“...”

They were all dressed in the same suits and they were all males in their twenties or thirties.

They would have lacked individuality to the point you wouldn't be able to tell their faces or names apart in a train station at peak hours. However, their eyes were without emotion. In return, their *perfect lack of individuality* made it seem like it should be impossible for them to melt into the background like this.

(What emotionless expressions. Their eyes...?)

Kamijou wondered where he had seen that expression before. Then, he looked back to the table.

In front of him was the shrine maiden whose name he didn't know.

Her expression was still emotionless even with ten men surrounding them.

"One hundred more yen," said the shrine maiden.

She spoke as she silently stood up. She didn't look like she was on her guard against *them*. In fact, she displayed the ease of someone waiting for another to come.

One of *them* took a step back and made a path. Another one of *them* respectfully handed over a one-hundred-yen coin on his palm to the shrine maiden without saying anything.

"Eh? Ah, so you know these people?" asked Kamijou in bewilderment.

"..."

The shrine maiden looked around herself for a bit, seemingly pondering something.

"Yes, My cram school teachers."

Her reply was abrupt and without concern.

She walked down the hallway and headed for the stairs leading to the first floor. The men followed, her shadows and her protectors, without a noise or a voice.

Kamijou began to hear the familiar bustle and noise of the music on the television from miles away, as if it had faded.

When *they* had left, Aogami Pierce finally spoke.

"Hold on, why are salaryman cram school teachers looking after her? They're not elementary school disciplinary officers or anything."

Part 3

It was a summer evening.

In order to forget about that mysterious shrine maiden and those men clad in suits, Kamijou and company decided to goof off for a while. Then, like little kids, they made the decision to go home at 5PM, and they upheld it.

“Bye-bye!” called Aogami Pierce, waving his arm in the air to them—like a little kid—before disappearing into the city gleaming in the sunset. Aogami Pierce didn’t live in a student dormitory like Kamijou. Instead, he led the relatively uncommon lifestyle of boarding at a bread shop. Apparently, the uniform used by its employees looked like a maid outfit.

Kamijou and Index were left alone in the wide street next to the station, in front of a line of large department stores.

Kamijou sighed.

Just as the idea that both of them were alone had appeared in his mind, there was a numbing tension spreading throughout his entire body.

The reason was obvious.

“What’s the matter, Touma?”

The girl beside him was innocently smiling at him. He had no choice but to answer that nothing was wrong. He breathed another sigh, this time quietly enough that she wouldn’t hear him.

It was because they lived together.

And they were even secretly living in a male dormitory.

And to top it all off, she was such a little girl.

A few days had passed since they returned to the dorms from the hospital, and whenever night came around, Index would lay down and sleep next to him as if it were the natural thing to do. And she never slept well, either. Maybe she couldn’t stand the heat, but she would toss and turn all night long, causing her feet, navel, and other things to pop in and out of her pajamas. Kamijou had no recourse but to lock himself into the room’s unit bath and cause a shut-in incident for a while. That was why he’d been sleep deprived lately.

“...Was I a terrible enough person to be on the news?” he grumbled to himself tiredly.

How would the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma have viewed the situation? In fact, the source of the two of them living together was the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma.

(What the heck were you doing at a time I wouldn't remember, Kamijou Touma!?)

"Ah!" Index noticed something and ground to a halt.

"Eh?" Kamijou gloomily followed her gaze. At the base of a windmill turbine sat a cardboard box with a kitten crying out with mewing sounds.

"Touma! Ca—"

"No way!"

Kamijou interrupted Index before she could finish.

"...Touma, I haven't said anything yet!"

"We're not raising it"

"Why not, how come? Why, why? Why can't we raise Sphinx?"

"Because our student dormitory doesn't allow us to have pets and I don't have any money! Also, don't already give it a name! And why Sphinx?! Don't give that name to a Japanese calico cat!!"

"Why don't you keep a cat! Do as you are told!"[3]

"???...Hah! Blabbering in English isn't going to make me listen to you!"

"No way! Kaukaukaukaukaukaukaukaukaukaukaukaaauu!!"

"Even with such a strange Stand-like screaming attack[4], no means no! Besides, you scared it away already! It just ran into the alley!"

"It's all your fault, Touma!"

"Mine!?"

The two shouted at each other in the summer evening.

Kamijou vaguely thought about this. He asked himself how the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma treated that girl. He came to the conclusion that it was probably something like what he was doing now.

[3] This was spoken in English.
[4] Reference to JoJo's Bizarre Adventure.

He was happy with that.

But at the same time, it felt a little lonely.

After all, *she was not looking at the current Kamijou*. What made her completely at ease and the person she wanted to show her extraordinary smile to was the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma.

He'd be lying if he said it didn't hurt.

But he still didn't think of giving up on the act.

"Humph, the Japanese shamisen are made from torn off cat skins! Why does this country do so many horrible things to cats!?"

"...Don't start insulting our national culture, stupid! Besides, you British people chase around foxes and bully the poor things!"

"Wha... Fox hunting is a proud national tradition and—!"

Index was about to growl at him, but all of a sudden, she froze, like she just noticed something.

"W-what? The cat? Did that cat from before come back!?"

Kamijou looked around. However, he didn't see anything like a cat anywhere, though.

"...That's strange, Touma it seems that the flow of magic power nearby is being controlled," Index murmured abruptly to Kamijou. "...The attribute is earth, color is green. This ritual... uses the ground as a medium to introduce magic power and acts through conscious intervention..."

It sounded like her internal musings were coming out of her mouth as broken phrases.

"What is it?" inquired Kamijou, looking at her carefully.

After a moment, Index breathed one word.

"...Runes?"

Spinning around and showing a sharp glint in her eyes reminiscent of the cutting edge of a knife, Index began to run vigorously towards the back alley of the gap between the buildings on the side of the road.

"Wha-, hey, Index!"

“It looks like someone has set up a magic circle. I’ll go investigate it Touma, so you go home first!”

As soon as she said that, Index’s figure disappeared into the interior of the back alley.

“I can go home first...?”

Kamijou thought that she was quite the mysterious girl. However, he certainly couldn’t just leave her to her own devices and go home. After all, a young girl had just gone into a suspicious-looking back alley by herself. The encounter rate with some incident in a place like that was probably about the same as a poorly made RPG.

Kamijou groaned. Misfortune reared its head again.

He was about to follow her in, but then, at the same instant, a voice came from behind him.

“It’s been a while, Kamijou Touma.”

His foot, about to step toward the alley, stopped.

It was because he heard the words “It’s been a while”. For Kamijou, those were essentially taboo. He remembered knowledge like the Japanese language or first grade mathematics. However his memories were different. He remembered nothing, from trivial things like when he bought a game to important things like how he scored on his end-of term exams.

When faced with someone he didn’t remember in the slightest, claiming that they were seeing each other again, the only thing he could do was respond with the greatest Japanese smile he could manage.

For the sake of protecting a certain girl’s happiness, Kamijou Touma would never let others realize that he had lost his memories.

He turned around.

“Ah.”

As expected, Kamijou had no recollection of the man standing there.

He was more of a teenager than a man but for a man over two meters tall, the term teenager could have been a stretch. He wore a black priest’s robe and, like Index, he had pale skin that couldn’t have belonged to someone Japanese.

Though he was a priest, the smell of perfume was overwhelming. His long hair was dyed red, he wore earrings in his ears, every one of his fingers was decorated by silver rings

and under his right eye was a tattoo that looked like a bar code. It all felt corrupt, like he was a priest of war or a religious traitor.

There was no reason Kamijou should have recognized him.

In fact, he didn't really want to have memories of a man like him.

"Hmph. It's been a while, but you don't even want to greet me, eh? Hm, that's fine. That's how our relationship should be. Just because we fought together one time doesn't mean you can let your guard down."

Despite that being what the perfume-stinking priest said, he was smiling quite amicably.

(Just who is this guy...?)

The strangeness of the priest in front of him was one thing, but he felt stronger confusion at the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma for being acquainted with a person that suspicious.

And he had something else on his mind.

Kamijou quickly glanced around toward the alleyway. Index had dove straight in all by herself. He didn't have time to spare chatting it up with a totally unknown wannabe priest, but...

"Oh, don't worry about that girl. I've engraved Opila runes in that area. She probably just went to locate the flow of magic power."

Kamijou was stunned.

Runic magic. A magical language that the Germanic people adopted in the second century A.D. Essentially, they were "characters that held power" such as "Kenaz". When Kenaz was written on a piece of paper, flames would spring forth from it.

(...What's going on?)

Kamijou's throat tightened.

It was not because of the priest in front of him was talking about some strange runic magic.

It was because such ridiculous knowledge flowed naturally from his own head without any sense of discomfort.

It was clearly abnormal. It was an odd sentiment, like a rusty bike dropping into the middle of a clean, pure lake, leaving a gaping hole in its wake. Right alongside extremely commonplace knowledge like "you cross the street at a green light" or "it costs money

every time you send a text message on a cell phone" was an...*abnormality where magical nonsense was mixed in with his everyday life as if it was natural!*

What kind of world did the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma live in?

For the first time, Kamijou Touma trembled at the true nature of his own self.

"Hm?"

The priest reeking of perfume shut one eye and grinned slightly like he had noticed something in the color of his face.

Kamijou couldn't understand what was going on. He didn't have time to spare having a conversation with someone. He could only ambiguously smile and suppress the nebulous feeling.

Suddenly, the red-haired priest took out what looked like a single card.

"Stop smiling all the time. Do you want me to kill you?"

The red-haired priest's grin grew wide, as if it were melting across the face of a waxen puppet.

He shook.

The knowledge that the pre-memory loss Kamijou had was warning him of danger, like it sent electricity through him.

"..."

His right hand moved before he could think about it.

He immediately positioned it in front of his face. As it blocked the sunlight pouring into his eyes, a flame burst forth from the palm of the priest's right hand. Like gasoline had erupted from his hand, he created a shining sword of crimson fire in the blink of an eye.

The priest did not waste a second.

He didn't show a shard of hesitation nor a trace of mercy as he swung the flame sword down mightily toward Kamijou's face.

When the fiery sword made contact it expanded, and flames shot out in all directions like a balloon popping. The fire made a brutal noise as it absorbed oxygen. The hellfire, more than three thousand degrees Celsius, whirled out and utterly violated their surroundings.

With a boom, the flames did not completely stop. They shined but then suddenly extinguished as if they had been frozen and smashed in the blink of an eye.

“Ha... hah...”

Without letting down his right hand he was using for defense, Kamijou started breathing raggedly and rapidly.

Imagine Breaker.

The unusual power of unknown identity that dwelled in Kamijou’s right hand was able to cancel out any supernatural power just by touching it, even if it was the systems of God.

“Hah... hah...!”

Seeing the stiff, trembling, and immobile Kamijou, the priest finally smiled.

“That’s it. That face. Shouldn’t the relationship between Kamijou Touma and Stiyl Magnus be like this? Don’t make me say it again—if you let your guard down just because we fought together one time, you’ll be in trouble.”

The priest’s smile ripped across his face again, melting it, stretching it out.

However, Kamijou couldn’t respond. It was not that he feared the abnormal power that dwelled within him. Neither did he fear the priest named Stiyl Magnus. Indeed, there was but one issue.

What bothered him was his own knowledge, his common sense. It had stopped the attack out of reflex, without thinking much at all, and as if it was the obvious solution...even though some crazy flame sword had been swung at him.

It was really scary.

“What... are you—”

Kamijou frantically took two or three steps back because the knowledge of the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma was telling him that his life was in danger.

(I don’t have time to deal with *the enemy within*. Right now I have to do something about the *enemy without*.)

“—trying to do, asshole!?”

Kamijou roared, lowering himself steadily into an unconventional fighting position, a stance so used to brawling it even surprised him. Maybe that was thanks to the knowledge soaked in him, too.

On the other hand, the magician that looked like a priest chuckled.

“Hm? I just want to tell you a secret.”

(What nonsense are you spouting?)

Just as Kamijou was thinking that... Stiyl pulled out a big envelope from his clothing. It was large and seemed like really important documents were inside.

Kamijou frowned.

(Is he seriously telling me a secret here? This guy just created huge explosions on this six-lane road wide enough to be a runway. And now he’s trying to tell me a secret?)

...?

Once Kamijou thought that far, he finally realized it.

Even though that explosion had made noise, there was absolutely no sign of commotion.

(...!?)

No. It was only now that Kamijou realized the truth.

It wasn’t that there was no commotion. There was nobody here in the first place. That six-lane road, with big department stores lined up on the left and right, had emptied of both people and cars without him noticing. No one but he and Stiyl were there.

The windmill turbines were still rattling, echoing through the empty street like a skeleton laughing. Far away, he could hear the siren ringing from the empty railroad crossing. The silence was like the middle of a lake at night.

“I already said...”

Quietly breaking the silence, Stiyl smirked.

“...I engraved the Opila runes.”

“Ehwaz (Go),” Stiyl said and flicked the oversize envelope he was holding from his index finger like he was flicking a postcard. The thick envelope spun like a Frisbee and slowly landed into Kamijou’s hands.

A strange symbol was inscribed on the mouth of the envelope like it was some kind of seal.

“*Gebo* (Receive).”

The moment Stiyl had muttered that, the words on the envelope started to glow. The seal opened right down the middle as if it was sliced apart by a knife.

“Have you heard of a cram school called Misawa?”

Stiyl asked in a singsong voice. The necessary documents flew out of the envelope, and each indeed appeared to have a rune inscribed on it. They floated together in the air before Kamijou’s eyes like a flying carpet.

“Misawa...?”

Kamijou Touma had memory loss.

Having precisely zero memories, he had no choice but to scan the name through his own knowledge. However, he still had no impression of a Misawa Cram School. It had seemed that the pre-memory loss him lacked interest in university entrance exams.

“At the least, it’s apparently the prep school with the most market shares in the nation, but...?”

Stiyl made the suggestion disinterestedly.

A prep school, as the name may have implied, was a school for preparing for exams. Think of them as cram schools meant for the “wandering students” who had failed university entrance exams.

In Academy City, the definition of a university prep school was a bit more contrived. *It could also refer to a prep school made for people who were good enough to get into a university, but who would purposely become wandering students for a year in order to advance to an even better university and study for its exams instead.*

One of the documents floated in front of Kamijou.

It seemed that Misawa Cram School was both *that* kind of university prep school *and* it had students who weren’t yet wandering. In other words, it also acted as a prep school for normal high schoolers trying to take entrance exams in their senior year.

“...So, why are you telling me about this Misawa Cram School? Is there a discount offered when you introduce it to friends?”

Kamijou looked at Stiyl with clear distrust; the priest in front of him seemed a bit removed from the concept of prep schools.

“It’s like this,” Stiyl nonchalantly explained, “A girl was imprisoned there, and it’s my duty to save her.”

Kamijou stared at him, speechless.

It wasn't because of the scary word "imprisoned", but because he was questioning that man's sanity. No, if Stiyl was simply insane, there wouldn't be a problem. Except there was, because he had the power to freely control flames.

"Hmph, I think you'll figure it out if you take a look at the documents."

Stiyl lifted his index finger up again. One after another, more sheets of copy paper flew out of the envelope Kamijou was holding, and like a blizzard they danced around Kamijou and surrounded him.

—One of them was a sketched map of Misawa Cram School.

However, there were apparently inconsistencies when compared to a full-scale map measured externally via infrared and ultrasonic waves. There were clearly crooked, hidden rooms in various places on the image, looking like leaves nibbled on by a worm.

—The second was a chart of Misawa Cram School's electricity bill.

However, the cost didn't add up when all the rooms and electrical appliances were accounted for. Someone somewhere in the building was clearly using a large amount of electricity, away from prying eyes.

—The next one was a checklist of people going in and out of Misawa Cram School.

However, a very large amount of food was being bought in bulk, even considering all the students and teachers. Even if you dressed up like a garbage-collecting janitor and investigated all the trash cans, the quantity wouldn't add up. It was clearly being eaten by *somebody* in the building.

—And the last sheet of paper was...

A report of a sighting a month ago, regarding a girl walking into the Misawa Cram School building.

According to the student dormitory manager, she hadn't returned to her room since then.

""As of now, it seems that Misawa Cram School has turned into a new religion that is centered on Science Worship," said Stiyl disinterestedly.

(Science Worship...?)

Kamijou frowned in puzzlement.

"Oh, you mean like those guys who think God is really an alien that came here in a UFO, or like those people who are trying to clone the DNA of saints or what?"

The idea that science and religion didn't mix was rather illogical. There were many Christian doctors and scientists in the western world.

At the same time, though, it was true that scientific religions with their backs against the wall caused horrible incidents. After all, they possessed cutting-edge technology. Formulating poison gas or bombs would be simple for them.

Academy City, which was both a place on the leading edge of technology and a place for learning and teaching, was particularly cautious of these scientific religions. This was because, of course, it was an environment for teaching things. Even a small slip-up in that regard could transform a teaching establishment into a brainwashing factory.

"I don't know what they're teaching. Honestly, I'm not even going to pretend to know what kind of cult Misawa Cram School has degenerated into. It's already been dissolved, after all."

"...?"

"To be frank," Stiyl continued on, not looking like he cared much, "Misawa Cram School has been hijacked. A science-crazy scam religion has been hijacked by a genuine magician—well, by an alchemist of the Zurich school."

"A genuine...?"

"Yeah, I know it sounds suspicious coming from me but... wait a minute."

"What is it?"

"...Aren't you being a little *too* understanding? You're not just letting everything go in one ear and out the other just because you come from a different world, right?"

Kamijou froze.

Not because what Stiyl said hit the mark or anything. Kamijou had been truly listening to Stiyl, and was trying to break down words he didn't understand so he could take everything honestly.

But that's where he felt strange.

He felt like the magician had pointed out a gap between the current Kamijou Touma and the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma.

(Don't realize it, don't realize it...!)

The current Kamijou didn't know what relationship this magician had with that girl. But he didn't want anyone to know about his memory loss, no matter who it was.

Kamijou had seen it. He had seen it in the hospital room. He had seen the girl in the white nun's habit on the verge of tears. He had seen her face of salvation after *he made her think* the man in front of her was the same Kamijou.

He could not allow that girl's salvation to be destroyed.

For that reason, Kamijou would deceive the world. He would even deceive himself.

"What? You give me that just because I so happened to be listening attentively? Are you a masochist or something? Are you the type that wants others to interrupt your words left and right?"

But the current Kamijou Touma didn't really understand how he was different from the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma. When you're walking along a road with a map and realize that you've gone astray, and when you look around and get a 360-degree view of a desert, you don't know which direction you should go.

For a while, Stiyl stared suspiciously at Kamijou.

"Fine, whatever. It's not a problem that this conversation is going well."

Stiyl finally reverted back to the original conversation.

"The things that are important are the reasons the alchemist had for hijacking the school. Well, one of them is obvious—he was probably thinking he could reuse the school's original fortresslike systems. Most of the students, or followers, haven't even realized that the principal changed.

"However," Stiyl exhaled lightly and said, "The alchemist's original goal is Deep Blood, who was being held captive by Misawa Cram School."

(Deep Blood?)

Kamijou had never heard of that name before, and neither did he have any such knowledge about it. But the meaning hidden behind those words was incredibly ominous.

"It seems that she was originally confined there so they could make her act like a shrine maiden. Well, I suppose they're drawing out high Level espers using the girl as a pretext, so the term 'shrine maiden' is actually fitting."

"..."

"The point is, the alchemist had been aiming for Deep Blood for some time, but the school was one step ahead of him. Why, it must have been quite a nuisance. His plan was to steal Deep Blood secretly and flee the city, but then the school made a bold move and ruined everything."

“So he forcefully took back what belongs to him from Misawa Cram School?”

It was like a master thief making all sorts of preparations to steal something from an art gallery, only for terrorists to occupy the building. The thief then stole the painting he had wanted to steal from those destructive maniacs who didn’t understand the value of those paintings, only to find that the art gallery had been packed with police. Unable to do anything, the master thief then had to build a barricade at the entrance of the art gallery and hide inside.

“Yeah. Acquiring *it* would be the highest aspiration for an alchemist...No, if we’re going that far, then it would be the greatest wish of all magicians. Or perhaps all of humanity itself.”

“???”

Kamijou had no idea what he was talking about and made and revealed a puzzled expression.

“Deep Blood is an ability meant for killing a *certain creature*. Well, that’s not all it is. It’s also the one and only chance at capturing one of those creatures alive, even though we don’t know if they exist.

Kamijou still didn’t understand.

“Well, if I have to use Christian terminology, these creatures are known as Cain’s descendant.”

Stiyl grinned a little, and then made a declaration, conspiratorially this time.

“Putting it simply, I’m talking about vampires.”

“Are you kidding me?”

That was the first thing Kamijou thought of when he heard the words coming out of Stiyl’s mouth.

Vampires. Kamijou didn’t know where the legends originated, but he knew a bit about them from video games and manga.

Vampires were weak to crosses and sunlight.

Vampires would die when a stake was driven through their heart.

Vampires would be reduced to ash after they died.

Those bitten by vampires would become vampires.

...That was about all he knew. And for some reason, the manga and video games in Kamijou's knowledge were, without exception, the punk-action variety where the slightest respect wasn't paid to the cross.

However, Stiyl grimaced and averted his gaze, saying, "...Things were happy and easy when we could still joke about it."

Despite the magician being able to control flames, he almost seemed afraid.

"Hmph. Deep Blood is a power for killing vampires. Since that exists, it wouldn't make sense unless vampires also existed. It's like a vicious cycle where a villain is required for someone to be a hero, but anyway, this one thing is definitely true...Even I'd deny it if I could."

"...Wait, what's that mean? Are you saying those vampires from picture books actually exist?"

Kamijou's brain denied it.

But for all his rejection, the man in front of him was giving off an air that was far too grave.

"Nobody has ever seen a vampire..." Stiyl Magnus sang, as if he was a big ball of confidence, "...because anyone who does, dies."

"..."

"Of course, even I won't believe this blindly. No one has seen one and yet the existence of Deep Blood proves them. That's the problem. We don't know how strong they are, or how many there are, or where they are. We don't know anything. And we can't do anything about something we don't understand."

Stiyl repeated like he was singing, but Kamijou couldn't process the word "vampire", so he wasn't really getting the sense that they were real.

(I guess it's like trying to take on unseen terrorists scattered around the world.)

"But for everything we don't know about, there are also unknown possibilities." Stiyl sneered cynically. "Kamijou Touma, have you heard of the Tree of Sephirot? ...I suppose you haven't, right?"

"...You know, you're not gonna get on my nerves by saying stuff like that."

"Whatever. Anyways, the Tree of Sephirot depicts the spiritual rank of God, angels, and humans on a hierarchical diagram. To put it simply, humans can climb up the ranks by training, but at some point, anything past that is unattainable."

"...You're treating me like an idiot, aren't you? What are you trying to say?"

"Is your pride hurt? What I'm trying to say is that *there is a height that humans cannot reach, no matter how hard they try*. However, human nature is to want to reach it anyway. Magicians exist precisely because of that. So what should be do?" Stiyl's cynical grin widened across his face like it was tearing it in half. "*It's simple. They just need to borrow the power of something inhuman*."

Kamijou couldn't say anything.

"The vampires are immortal. Even if you were to gouge out their heart and implant it in a magic sword, it would keep on living. When all's said and done, it would be kind of like a living spiritual item." Stiyl explained. "Whether or not it's true doesn't matter. Scholars will try it if there's even the slightest possibility."

In other words, this is what Stiyl was trying to say.

It didn't matter whether or not vampires actually existed. What was important was that there were people who would cause trouble because they believed in them. And now an incident had occurred, someone had to resolve it. That was the important part.

"In other words, nobody knows whether vampires exist or not, right?"

It was common to see it in action films; a bunch of people fighting over some ancient treasure that nobody knew whether it existed or not. However, it was stupid for such things to happen in real life.

"It's originally our job to handle occult things whose existence is uncertain." Stiyl flashed a bitter grin. "It seems like both Misawa Cram School and the alchemist were serious. They're seriously playing a game over these vampires. Someone like Deep Blood is necessary because they need a trump card."

"..."

"And do you know Deep Blood's background? It's rumored that the girl originally used to live in a mountain village in Kyoto. But, one day, the village was annihilated. The last reported villager was seemingly in a state of disarray, saying that a monster would kill him. After that, the story is that people who rode out to the village found it deserted save for a single girl, standing there along, and white ash, blowing around like a blizzard and blanketing the village."

Ash.

It was said that vampires would turn into ash after they died.

"I mean, vampires are things we're not sure exist, after all. But try to think about it more carefully. Deep Blood is the power to kill vampires. If that's the case, Deep Blood must

first encounter vampires in order to work. If one wishes to encounter a vampire, regardless of how pure one's intentions were, the best thing to do would be to first gain control over Deep Blood, right? ...Of course, I think actually controlling the owner of a power immense enough to kill vampires would be a big problem in itself."

It was a completely supernatural discussion.

It was dangerous to listen on, Kamijou's instincts were telling him. If he continued to listen to that person, his common sense would be twisted. And Kamijou had a premonition that if that kept up, it may end up in a state where he couldn't reverse it.

He quickly asked a question so he could cut the conversation short.

"So, you've been talking about all these secrets for a while now, but what exactly did you need to tell me.

"Ah, that's right. We don't have much time, so let's end this quick." Stiyl nodded twice to himself, pleased. "...Basically, I'm in a situation where I must go raid Misawa Cram School and get Deep Blood out of there."

Kamijou simply nodded in response.

"Don't nod so easily like that. You're coming with me."

.....

"Huh!? What did you just say!?"

"The simple truth. Also, the conversation just now was the briefing. Do you still remember everything? As for the documents, they have the Kenaz rune on them, so they'll burn up after you finish reading them. You'll get yourself into trouble if you slack off on memorizing them."

"Wai...!"

(Are you kidding me!?)

This Stiyl person wouldn't hesitate to kill someone, and he had the most suitable power to do it. If Kamijou snuck into the headquarters of this enemy alchemist, he could end up getting involved in a murder incident.

"Also, one more thing," said Stiyl in an emotionless voice. "I suppose you don't have any rights to refuse. If you don't obey, we'll take away Index from you."

"!"

For some reason, he could almost hear those words stabbing into his heart.

His knowledge was afraid. The remnants of the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma seemed to be afraid of something.

“The job Necessarius has handed down to you is to be her leash, to prevent her from turning traitor, since her ‘collar’ was removed. But if you don’t obey the will of the Church, then they can’t trust that to work.” Stiyl sighed. “But, well, personally, if the Church considers you unnecessary, then it helps me out. I’d be grateful, even. Because a leash that doesn’t work means nothing. I would be able to recover her with no worries.”

That was a threat.

If he didn’t obey, they would take that girl away from him.

“...”

He was trembling. His heart was beating away like a nail being hammered in. Kamijou Touma didn’t have any memories. The one who had met that girl was the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma, and it had nothing to do with the current him. His heartbeat was acting up, and he was losing the ability to think. It must have been because of what remained in him from before his memory loss. It shouldn’t have been related to the current him at all.

So then...

Why?

“...Are you serious, you bastard?”

Why could he have so much faith that the fury he felt was justified?

Kamijou wondered about it.

It was true that Index first met the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma, and the one Index trusted and smiled at wasn’t the Kamijou who was currently standing there

But he thought that was okay.

The girl he had met in that white hospital room had looked at the wounded Kamijou and cried...

If it would prevent her tears, then...

He swore to uphold his lie, even if he had to fool the world and deceive himself...!

“...Hmph.”

Stiyl nonchalantly looked away.

His face looked like someone whose job had been stolen. Kamijou would be lying if he said it wasn't weird.

"If you want to deal with me, wait until we deal with the alchemist hidden in Misawa Cram School first. Also, I forgot to mention it, Deep Blood's real name is Himegami Aisa. There's a photo of her in there, so make sure you know what she looks like. You'd be at a loss if you didn't know the face of the person you were trying to rescue."

A single photo slipped out of the envelope.

The photo seemed to be powered by Stiyl's runes as well as it danced in the air and stopped right in front of Kamijou.

Kamijou stared at the photo.

(Deep Blood. What kind of face does the esper that holds such a dangerous name have?)

And there was the face of the shrine maiden he had met this afternoon.

"Eh...?"

Kamijou's breathing froze.

The picture looked like a blown-up student ID photo or something. It was definitely the face of Himegami Aisa, the shrine maiden from this afternoon.

Kamijou recalled what Stiyl had said.

"—It seems that she was originally confined there so they could make her act like a shrine maiden.

He recalled what the girl had said during the day.

"—I'm not a shrine maiden."

Kamijou recalled what the magician had said.

"—A girl was imprisoned there, and it's my duty to save her."

He had remembered Himegami Aisa's words.

"—Yes. My cram school teachers."

"...!"

(But why?)

Kamijou wondered. According to Stiyl's explanation, Himegami Aisa should be imprisoned in Misawa Cram School. If that shrine maiden really was Deep Blood, why could she enter a fast food restaurant and eat hamburgers?

"—Train fare back home, four hundred yen."

(Did she escape?)

The only possible reason why the imprisoned Himegami Aisa would be outside was because she had escaped from Misawa Cram School.

"—My total fortune, three hundred yen."

Thinking of that brought him to Himegami's lack of money on hand. She had hurried to escape with only the clothes on her back. If she continued to take public transportation like trains and buses, her money would obviously run low.

(But why was she in a fast-food restaurant?)

If she had run out of there like hell, what reasons could she have had for relaxing in a place like that?

"—I binged."

"Ah!"

Suddenly, Kamijou remembered her saying that.

What if her money had already run out, and she couldn't flee any longer? What if she was just trying to have one last good time at the end?

The girl wished for one hundred yen.

So if she just had one hundred more yen, she could escape from the control of Misawa Cram School?

In that case...

The girl's one and only wish...

Who the hell was the idiot who ruined it for her?

"—That's why I stuffed myself."

"Damn it..."

Also, Himegami didn't resist when she was surrounded by the cram school teachers. Obviously, she must have wanted to resist. How could she be so willing to go back like that after escaping from Misawa Cram School?

Anyone else would have chosen to run away.

If she hadn't been able to escape with her own power, she would have asked others for help.

However...

Asking someone for help would have meant getting them wrapped up in trouble.

"Damn it all...!!"

Kamijou was angry. He was so angry that he could barely think. He was outraged that Misawa Cram School imprisoned the girl like some sort of object. He was revolted at the alchemist who had snatched the girl away. He was infuriated by Stiyl who had said that Deep Blood was the ace used to keep the vampires in check.

But the one that Kamijou was extremely mad about was that Himegami Aisa had ignored her own well-being to protect him.

Because that was wrong. If Kamijou had just given her a hundred yen, he could have changed the girl's fate. However, the girl was actually willing to sacrifice all the hard work she put in to escape from Misawa Cram School just to save a boy who sent her back into despair. That was wrong.

He did not know what type of new age religion it was. But she was just a single girl. He could not imagine what sort of treatment someone confined to such a place would receive. He did not want to imagine it.

Kamijou should have been the one to feel that pain.

(Why did you go and—)

Kamijou bit his lip. He tasted blood clinging to his front teeth.

(—put someone in your debt like that!?)

That was what made him the angriest when he thought about it. His head felt like it would boil over just because of it.

Kamijou didn't have any memories.

But that way of life...The belief that it was okay to be treated as an object by everything around you...The patter of thinking that said there was true happiness in saving others while disregarding your own pain.

The lone girl suffered for the sake of others and smiled anyway.

In the past, Kamijou had seemed to meet such a girl before. He was frustrated with himself for not being able to remember it.

There was no way he wouldn't go and save her.

Because he felt like...He had to punch Himegami Aisa hard once for all the selfish things she'd done.

Between the Lines 1

—The girl was standing in the middle of a sea of ash.

It was a story of ten years ago.

The First Lancers, one of the thirteen knight squads of England, departed for a mission to "inspect the enemy headquarters faster than anyone else" in accordance with its founding principles.

This time, the enemy territory was a small village on an eastern island nation, in the mountains of Kyoto. Their routine mission was to determine the identity of abnormally inflated magic flows, and if there was malicious intent behind one, to eliminate it.

—It had been over six hours since they lost contact with the village.

—It had been over three hours since the police officers who went there to investigate disappeared.

As every member of the squad could guess, the village in question was completely destroyed. However, that wasn't something rare to them. England had the British Museum which was known as the Arsenal. That bloody altar contained spiritual treasures stolen from all over the world. Compared to the angered ancient kings who dwelled in those treasures turning against their captors, the danger level was low.

Their provided equipment was light as well, including only the usual Surgical Armor and cross-shaped spears, without even any Longinus Replicas. The Surgical Armor could direct magical power throughout itself and heighten the wearer's mobility by twenty times. It could be called a first-class spiritual item, but it was clear to everyone that the big shots involved didn't feel any sort of threat from the situation.

But even that was but a trifle. There was something that bothered them.

Something like this had been in the final message of a survivor who had used a telephone...

“Help... me... that’s not... human... that’s—”

Of course, nobody had believed him.

Even the higher-ups in the Church didn’t treat it as true, which is why they hadn’t given them decent equipment.

But a somehow unpleasant, heavy pressure was growing in every member of the First Lancers, which had a long record of service.

The creature. Though there were many old records remaining in the British Museum, no one had ever seen this particular creature, and the very concept of capturing one was nonexistent. Why had the presence of this uncertain creature been denied until today? The answer to that was the clear reason for the pressure they felt themselves under.

It was because the world would have ended long ago if a being like that existed.

The terrifying thing wasn’t the strength of this creature. If they couldn’t match its strength, humans could use ways other than brute force to beat it. That’s why humans had created many different kinds of tools, weapons, and armaments.

The terrifying thing wasn’t the immortality of the creature. If they couldn’t even kill the enemy, they just had to find a way to defeat it without killing it. For example, they could just imprison it under the ice of Antarctica or dismantle its invulnerable body into two hundred pieces and bottling it up.

Those things weren’t the problems.

The problem was the vast amount of magic power those creatures were said to possess.

The magic power in magic was gasoline, to put it simply. By refining the crude oil in the body—your life span and life force—one would produce the easy to use gasoline. Humans possess only a limited life span to begin with, so the difference between someone with strong and weak magical power was nothing more than whether the person was good or bad at the refinement.

However, that didn’t apply to those creatures.

The life span and life force that acted as their crude oil was on a fundamentally different level. No, not on a different level—their life force was literally infinite. Naturally, that also created a difference in the magic they could use. There was no way that a handgun

with a limited number of bullets could rival an uncountable number of missiles attacking you.

Therefore, the First Lancers laughed off their unease but were unable to wipe it away completely.

And when they pushed their way through the vegetation and arrived at the mountain village left behind by the ages, what they saw crushed their hearts in a death grip.

Pure white ash was spread as far as the eye could see.

A blizzard of white ash was raging in the eastern village left behind by the ages. The roofs of the houses, the soils of the paddies, and the slender farm roads were all covered in a thin layer of ash.

Ash.

Was that the... remains of that creature?

However, that wasn't what surprised them. If they *were* remains, there were enough for more than just ten or twenty, but even that couldn't stand up to the scene before them.

In the center of the tempest stood a girl.

If they were to guess at her age, she must have been no more than five or six, and she had the black hair characteristic of an Asian. But despite seeing her sweet face, the very souls of the knights who came to destroy the heresy were frozen.

Even those creatures plaguing the village had been annihilated and turned into an ashen maelstrom...

Despite being in that hell, the girl didn't have a scratch on her.

The wind danced, and the ashes fluttered.

As if there was a sanctuary surrounding her, the ashes didn't come close to her, despite the turmoil storming about and burying the mountain-encircled village. It was as if the ashes, though dead, were avoiding her out of fear.

"I..."

The girl spoke.

"I... killed again."

It was like she was describing her everyday life.

CHAPTER 2

Witch-Hunting With Fire.

By_The_Holy_Rood…

Part 1

Kamijou decided to think about the girl named Index.

His knowledge said that she had a perfect memory, where she would never forget anything she learned. Using that trait, she had recorded 103,000 grimoires in her brain.

However, that ability was a double-edged sword. Never forgetting meant that she would also never forget anything she wanted to. From a three-year-old supermarket flyer to each and every face of the people she passed by at the station during rush hour, every meaningless memory constantly accumulated in her head, since she couldn't remove them from her brain.

To deal with that, she had to use magic to erase all her own memories once a year. If she didn't do that, her brain would blow out and she'd die.

However, right now she was somehow relaxing next to Kamijou, smiling.

According to her story, the one who saved her from that predicament was Kamijou himself. But he didn't understand what he had felt at the time, and he didn't know what he had done.

(Now then.)

He and Stiyl had parted for the time being. Kamijou had brought Index back to his dorm, but he had to leave again to head to the Misawa Cram School battlefield. Taking Index along was out of the question, so the smarter option would be to hide the fact he was going there altogether.

But if he couldn't come up with a reason to go out, Index may start to feel suspicious and perhaps even want to come along.

“Touma?”

His palms were sweaty.

He might not return alive. Obviously, he could never, ever bring Index somewhere like that.

“Hey, Touma?”

It was obvious what he had to do.

For the moment, he swallowed his anxiety and made up his mind to start ranting like crazy.

“I have to go to a super-high-tech primary culture institute for a bit. What, you want to come? You’d better not; you’re hopeless with machines, and you probably don’t even know how to work a super magnetic cerebral cortex detector. Which would mean you would get trapped in there by the auto-locking doors, since they’re security Level Four. Plus, if you investigate basic solutions without registering the exons first, you’ll get shocked with electricity, like a zapping negative ion beam!!”

“Gyawaah!”

As expected, Index let out a yelp, overloaded from the bombardment of technobabble.

It was understandable. This was Index. She had so little modern sense that she would involuntarily bow to the ticket vending machines at the station, saying, “Welcome!”

“Then I’m going out. Dinner’s in the fridge, just microwave it and you can eat it. Don’t put the spoon in the microwave and play with sparks. And don’t you open the fridge door to cool yourself off.”

“Eh? Ah, uu... I don’t seem to be really capable of using a microwave.”

Some people might not understand what a person could possibly do wrong when using a microwave. Index, however, had shown him various ways of messing this up, like blowing up the dressing packet in a convenience store bento box by microwaving it while still in the wrapper, exploding soft-boiled eggs while trying to prepare them, melting a bento box by overheating it...Anyway, it always ended with a bang. Maybe she had mistakenly taught herself that microwaves are machines for making things blow up?

(...At least it doesn’t look like I need to worry about seeming suspicious.)

Kamijou sighed at Index, who was having a staring contest with the microwave, as if to say that this time she wouldn’t fail.

Then, he realized something.

“Hey! What’s hidden inside your clothes? More accurately, near your stomach!”

“Eh?”

Index froze.

She turned to Kamijou and said, “I-I’m not hiding anything, okay? I promise you, in the name of our father in heaven, and nuns can’t tell lies, after all!”

As soon as she finished saying that, he heard a kitten’s mew from Index’s stomach.

“Gruahh! Was that all your piety was worth? Didn’t you just break the oath you made with all of your heart!? Whatever, just take out that stray cat you’re hiding in your clothes!”

Perhaps it was because he was talking to Stiyl and was too nervous that he didn’t notice it. It was likely that the reason Index had stayed in the alley for so long wasn’t that she wanted to look for the source of the rune, but rather that she wanted to look for that stray cat.

“Mgh! T-Touma, this piece of clothing is called the Walking Church, right?”

“So what?”

“And a church should extend its hand of salvation to lost sheep without expecting anything in return. Therefore, I took in Sphinx, who was adrift in the streets, by the hand of the Church. Amen!”

“…”

Kamijou’s lips seemed somewhat numb as he said, “...So, you mean that you’ll raise the cat inside your clothes, right? Okay, got it. So I just pour the cat litter down your collar, I take it?”

“…”

“…”

“Th-that’s fine! I’ve decided that Sphinx will be sheltered by the church!”

“Whoa, you really can’t plan anything, can you? At least think about your duty to another living creature’s life!”

“If we raise it like family, then it’ll be fine!”

“I don’t want to be treated like a dad by the cat!”

Though it left a bad taste in his mouth, Kamijou really felt like dumping the cat while heading to Misawa Cram School... But he was pretty sure if he did that, Index would definitely come after him in order to get the stray cat back.

“Stupid! Stupid Touma! I already decided I’m definitely going to take care of this cat!

“...Say that when you can earn money for yourself.”

“But don’t worry! Even though I called you stupid, it was only in hiragana!”[5]

“Listen to me! Wait, what the hell does that mean!?”

On the other hand, he got the feeling that Index would back off if he decided she could keep the cat.

(...How should I put this...Such misfortune.)

Kamijou sighed in defeat. When he thought about what the stray cat’s food would cost, he realized he would have to go with one less dish at dinner per day from now on. He was seriously exhausted.

(Really, of all the things, of all the times, why did she pick up a stupid stray cat?)

“.....Fine.”

“Hm? Touma? What did you say?”

“.....I give up, so you can keep it, okay?”

But, well...

Index looked happy enough to shed a tear at that simple sentence. That made him think that, well, maybe it was okay.

“O Lord in heaven! Your warm light of love has finally reached the heartless, cruel, cold-blooded, snake-like Touma! Thank you for saving this stray cat’s innocent soul, I won’t forget this for the rest of my life.”

Something prevented Kamijou Touma from being fully satisfied.

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[5] This joke only makes sense when viewing the original Japanese text. Index calls Touma stupid and is written in the text using hiragana as opposed to kanji. Index seems to think that it lessens her insult. Of course, there’s no way Kamijou can know what she is talking about.

Part 2

After exiting his dormitory room, he saw Stiyl, who he had said goodbye to a while back, hanging up things that looked like trading cards around the hallway.

“What are you doing?”

“As you can see, I am spreading a barrier and putting up a temple here.” Stiyl said as he worked. “Since we can’t be certain that some other magician won’t make a move on Index while we’re preoccupied with Misawa Cram School. Well, I think it’s merely temporary peace of mind, but optimistically, leaving Innocentius here should at least buy her time to escape.”

Innocentius.

Though Kamijou didn’t have any memory, his knowledge was telling him that that was a humanoid-shaped ultimate weapon made of three thousand degrees Celsius flames that had an automatic tracking ability. The weakness was—

“It can only be used inside the barrier of the scattered runes and will be unable to maintain its form if the runes are destroyed, right?”

“...Let me tell you something,” Stiyl’s ears twitched. “That definitely doesn’t mean that my power is inferior to yours. There just happened to be a geographical problem. If there were no sprinklers then...”

“Eh? Did we fight before?”

Kamijou only had knowledge and no memories. Therefore, even though he knew how to beat Innocentius, he didn’t know where that knowledge came from.

“Ugh... It wasn’t even worth remembering in the first place. Is that what you’re saying?” Stiyl moved along the conversation, having misunderstood something. “Well, fine. Once I put up one last rune, the barrier will be fully prepared, and then we can head for our primary objective... How troublesome. I have to set up a boundary to keep off magicians, but I can’t make it too strong or else that girl will notice it.”

Despite muttering a complaint, Stiyl looked very happy somehow.

That made Kamijou realize something.

“Are you in love with Index?”

“Bwah!?” Stiyl blushed as if his heart had stopped. “W-W-what are you talking about all of a sudden!? Sh-she’s a target of protection and in n-no way an object of romantic interest—!”

Kamijou chuckled and ended the conversation.

That was because Kamijou felt that if he continued to delve deeper into that, he would be digging into his own grave. The main point wasn’t whether the current Kamijou Touma liked Index or not, but that the current Kamijou’s feelings mustn’t be any different from the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma.

Kamijou didn’t know how the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma viewed Index nor how he had interacted with her.

If Kamijou were to say something carelessly and there was an inconsistency between that and what the pre-memory loss Kamijou had said, then it could reveal that he had lost his memories.

(It’s like there are two of me...)

Kamijou sighed deeply in his heart. It wasn’t really accurate to say that there were two of him. It felt more like ridiculous joke where an imposter that had changed places and was desperately acting like the real one.

“Before we charge into Misawa Cram School, let’s talk about our enemy,” continued Stiyl, who might have been trying to redirect the conversation away from that topic to avoid further questioning.

They exited the dormitories. As they walked through the streets in the evening light, Kamijou decided to hear him out.

“The enemy’s name is Aureolus Izzard.”

Stiyl first introduced the enemy’s name.

“There’s only one person named Aureolus, but...Yes? What, surprised because it’s such a famous name? This one is only a descendant, though He doesn’t have the kind of power you hear about in legends.”

“? Who is this Aureolus guy?”

“...I see. I forgot you were completely oblivious to our side. But even so, you have at least heard about Paracelsus, right?”

“???”

“Argh...! It’s the name of one of the most well-known alchemists in the world!” said Stiyl impatiently.

While walking down the evening street, Kamijou asked, “So, is this guy absurdly strong?”

The August sunset was burning. The large number of windows, windmill turbines, everything was dyed orange red. Kamijou thought that it looked just like a faded photograph. Perhaps that was because their conversation didn’t seem so realistic.

“It’s not a big deal in and out of itself...But he did get his hands on *something* that’s letting him suppress Deep Blood, after all. And I don’t want to think this...but in the worst case, he might be using her to tame the creature.”

That seemed to worry Stiyl more than Aureolus Izzard.

Kamijou couldn’t accept that, though. However unique the situation was, he shouldn’t be treating the enemy’s ability as second priority.

“Hey, is it okay to think like that? I don’t know how irregular those vampires and Deep Blood are but shouldn’t we be focusing on the enemy leader? If you’re fighting someone with fire all around you, and you are distracted by that fire, you’ll get your face beaten in.”

“Hm? Ah, no, that’s actually nothing to worry about. The Aureolus name might be top class, but his strength has waned. *Alchemist isn’t a profession in the world of magic* in the first place.” Stiyl pointed out, bored. “Divination, alchemy, summoning. In your words, those are just language, mathematics, and history. Even language teachers study some math, right? If you’re a magician, then first you sink your teeth into everything and then find a specialized field that suits you. That’s basic. Also, Aureolus Izzard is only called an alchemist because he has no talent besides that. And also...alchemy itself isn’t even a completed field of study to begin with.”

“...”

Even after all that explanation, Kamijou only sort of had a point on a historical time line about alchemy in his knowledge. It was a method of fraud used widely in the sixteenth century, where people took in large amounts of money by playing tricks on royalty and nobility.

“Alchemy, particularly that of late Zurich, is an imitator of a subject called Hermeticism. In general, though, people know it as more like...something to turn lead into gold or to synthesize an elixir of immortality.”

Stiyl didn’t sound interested. Perhaps because it wasn’t his own vocation.

"*Those were nothing more than experiments.* The reason scientists constantly consult testers is because they want to know about whatever theorem or law. Those testers aren't in it to create something, right? Alchemists are the same—their essence isn't one of creation but of knowing."

"...It's like how Einstein's goal was to study the theory of relativity, and the atomic bomb was just a by-product of the research?"

If that was the case, he felt like scholars were an arrogant bunch. They created things, and yet they never considered the effect they would have on the world. The term for that was "madman".

"That's right. But, besides researching the formula and principle, alchemists have an ultimate goal." Stiyl paused for a breath. "—To be able to simulate the entire world inside their mind."

"..."

"If one can understand every law of the world, one could create a perfect simulation in their brain. Of course, if even a single law is wrong, the internal image would be distorted."

"??? What do you mean by that? Are you talking about a Dummy Skill?"

It was said that on southern islands like Fiji and Melanesia, a requirement to become its chief was to have the talent to accurately predict the next day's weather.

At first glance, that "weather forecast" seemed like a supernatural ability. In reality, though, the person is unconsciously sensing wind currents, cloud shapes, the temperature and humidity. The forecast is simply the result of repeating massive calculations in your head. The island chiefs are totally ignorant of these unconscious measurements, so they accurately predict the next day's weather just by "listening to the voices of the wind."

Stiyl was definitely saying something along those lines.

The island chiefs were perfectly simulating the next day's weather. However, the world they envisioned was imaginary—one which would crumble if those perfect calculations were even the slightest bit off.

"...But what use would something like that have? Are they trying to create some sort of calculator that can predict the future? Like weather forecasting?"

"No," Stiyl said nonchalantly. "What do you think would happen if you could drag what you pictured in your head into the real world?"

That was really a shocking proclamation.

“Bringing something you picture in your mind into the real world, such as ectoplasm or an image using Telesma to summon an angel, isn’t really an unusual method in the world of magic.” Stiyl folded his arms. “Therefore, the power to imagine an accurate world has huge consequences. In simple terms, you’d be able to use everything in the world like your own hands and feet, even gods and devils.”

“...Wait.”

“Of course, it is very difficult to do this. The flow of the river; the flow of clouds; the flow of people, the flow of blood—there is a vast number of laws in the universe. If you get just one of those wrong, you can’t construct the world in your mind. A warped world is the same as a warped wing—as soon as you summoned it, it would destroy itself and vanish.”

(I guess that part is like a computer program.)

No matter how perfect the program was, if someone forgot to code a single line, there would be an error, and the program would crash.

“But on the other hand, *wouldn’t we be completely helpless if he perfected it?* You sure as hell can’t win against the entire world.”

He could only state that opinion with relative ease because deep down, Kamijou didn’t believe any of this.

But he was right, a human couldn’t defeat the entire world. It wasn’t because gods or devils were overwhelmingly strong or anything.

It was because *the entire world included Kamijou and everybody else who lived there.*

It was a simple fact. Imagine a mysterious mirror that you could drag reflections out of. However strong Kamijou was to become, if he pulled out an exact copy, they’d just end up defeating each other.

But despite that, Stiyl didn’t look that tense.

“I already told you, it’s fine. *As a field of study, alchemy is incomplete.*”

“Huh?”

“Let me put it this way. If I want you to explain everything in the world, including every grain of sand on the beach or the stars in the night sky, how long are you going to take? I don’t think you can finish explaining after one or two hundred years, right?

"..."

"That's the situation. *The incantation itself is complete.* But a human's lifetime is too short to recite the whole thing," Stiyl hissed. "Though there are people trying all sorts of things to accomplish it. For example, by trying to omit needless parts to shorten it as much as they can. Or by dividing one hundred spells into ten parts, then passing those down from father to child, and child to grandchild, chanting it a little at a time."

But even so, there hadn't been a single case of success.

No needless parts exist in a finished spell in the first place, and passing it from parent to child to grandchild would *distort the incantation* like a telephone game.

"On the other hand—" For the first time, Stiyl seemed to be showing a spirit to battle. "—*a creature without a life span can chant spells that are too long for humans.* Yet another reason why this creature presents an imposing threat to magicians."

(Perhaps that's why he wanted a vampire.)

For scholars, it was probably agonizing to know the answer but not be able to prove it.

And if their human body couldn't fulfill it...

They just had to insert something outside the category of human into the magic.

"Well, alchemy is certainly a threat, but Aureolus Izzard doesn't currently have the capacity to master it. The best he could do is make stuff...He's got his hands full just fortifying Misawa Cram School, the setting for all this, and setting up a million traps to deny intruders."

"...?"

Kamijou felt that something was not right. Why was Stiyl so confident?

"Hey, do you know that Izzard guy?"

"Of course we do. We bot belong to the same religion after all," Stiyl casually said. "I belong to the Anglican Church, and he belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. We belonged to different denominations, but we're acquainted. We're not friends, though."

To Kamijou, it was really hard to imagine the terms "church" and "magician" together.

Necessarius, the organization Stiyl and Index were affiliated to, was aimed at studying magic for the sake of killing magicians. However, they were heretics among the heretics. Even if the Anglican Church was recognized to have such an organization, the Roman Catholic Church of a different denomination couldn't possibly have a similar organization...

After hearing Kamijou question that, Stiyl frowned and said, “Necessarius is an exception amongst exceptions, other Churches do not have similar organizations.”

Stiyl sighed and continued.

“But even if we’re exceptions amongst exceptions, then he’s a special case among special cases: a Cancellarius. Basically, he writes grimoires for the Church. He’s creating the same kind of books, but they’re used in the opposite way. They’re instruction manuals that say things like ‘lately, witches have been using this sort of spell, so to combat it, read whatever page of the Bible.” Stiyl fluttered his hand in the air. “It’s not strange for people of the Church to write books to warn people about these things. The grimoires of Pope Honorius III and King James I are a couple of the really famous ones.”

“...I see. So that’s why you said that Aureolus Izzard’s power isn’t really much.”

“That’s right. He has an abundance of knowledge, but none of it is suited for actual combat. It’s like a quiet social club member that’s not in a sports club. But at the same time, he’s also an annoying opponent. That’s because he’s one of the few Cancellarii of the Roman Catholic Church and had a lot of influence. The Roman Catholic Church is planning to fight hard against him in order to punish his betrayal.”

“No, I don’t mean that. Aureolus is, like, as important as popes and kings, right? Could you maybe be jealous of him?”

“...I can treat that as a taunt, right?”

“I’m up for it if you want to fight me, but don’t mistake me as your opponent.” Kamijou stared forward. “I can see the battlefield.”

The two of them stopped.

Under the seemingly flaming sunset, the building awaited them.

Part 3

“But, well...” murmured Kamijou, looking up at the building.

It could only be described as an irregularly shaped building. The building itself was a perfectly ordinary, rectangular, twelve-story tower. However, there were four of them. An intersection sat in the middle, and the placement made the entire structure a square with a cross in the middle when looked at from above. Raised passages straddled adjacent buildings, connecting them to one another.

(Such a building plan should defy the Land Area Planning Adjustment Project, right?) Kamijou thought as he looked up at the aerial walkways.

In general, the rights to the sky belonged to the possessor of the land underneath. In other words, anything above the road should be public property.

“Never mind, that’s not important.” he thought aloud, running his eyes over the four-building Misawa Cram School’s Academy City branch.

Examining the building, it didn’t give him the unconventional impression that a term like “Science Worship” would give. It seemed like a totally normal prep school, pure and simple. Even the students entering and exiting from time to time didn’t present anything that seemed out of the ordinary.

“Anyway, our initial target is the fifth level of the south building—next to the cafeteria. There seems to be a secret room there,” said Stiyl casually.

The map sketches had been lit on fire after Kamijou had looked over them. Did that mean Stiyl had memorized the entire layout?

“A secret room?”

“Yeah. It should be some trick that uses some illusion or distortion to conceal itself from the people inside. That building has more holes in it than a house of building blocks made by a child.” Stiyl stared at the building. “...I could find seventeen secret rooms just by looking at the location diagram. And the one beside the cafeteria on the south building’s fifth level is the closest one to us.”

“...Hmm. It doesn’t look like a suspicious ninja mansion or anything,” Kamijou grunted without any real reason.

Stiyl muttered to himself alongside him, annoyed, “...It doesn’t look suspicious, huh.”

“Yeah?”

Kamijou looked at Stiyl. His eyes were on the buildings piercing up through heaven and earth, but he finally shook his head, like he was taking a breath.

“Don’t worry about it. Even though I’m a specialist, I can’t spot anything dubious. I can’t spot anything dubious, even though I, as a specialist, am looking at it *quite* carefully.”

Despite saying that, Stiyl didn’t look too happy as he watched the school. It was like he was a doctor, clearly looking at something abnormal in an X-ray and yet unable to find the affected body part.

“...”

It was suspicious, too suspicious. He didn't really know why, but it was way too suspicious.

Stiyl just said that he couldn't find anything dubious, but that didn't mean he was asserting that there *were no dangerous places in the building*. He actually couldn't tell one way or the other. There could be tons of unseen land mines buried in there, or maybe there wasn't anything at all. It was a black box.

To be honest, was it really alright to enter a building that a magic expert couldn't even tell whether or not it was safe?

"Of course we shouldn't," Stiyl answered quickly. "But we have to go in, right? We're here to rescue someone, not kill someone. I would be really grateful if I could just burn the entire building down from the outside."

Stiyl's words must be more than half serious.

"Hold on... What do you mean we can only go in? Are we going to go in through the main entrance like that? No tactics? Like no way to avoid being detected or beating the enemy safely?"

"Do *you* have any tricks up your sleeve?"

"...! Are you kidding me!? Are you really going to charge in like that? How is that any different from charging into a building that's occupied by terrorist!? Even characters in cheap action movies come up with one or two plans to outwit the enemy!"

"...Hmm, well, if I inscribed 'Ansuz Gebo' on my body with a knife, I could at least conceal my presence."

"Then do that! I don't wanna get hurt!"

"Listen to me!" Stiyl said with an irritated tone. "Even if I suppressed my presence or became invisible, I would have *still used magic*. I can't falsify that."

"...What?"

"You have no concept of magic power at all. Seems like I have to explain it to you." Stiyl sighed. "For example, what if there's a painting that has only the color red?"

"...Psychologically, I think that's a bad omen."

"Shut up and don't butt in. That red paint is Aureolus's magic power, and the whole building is teeming with it. If you smeared my blue paint onto a red painting, it would be clear to everyone, right?"

"...I don't really understand, but you're basically a walking transmitter, right?"

“Something like that. It’s certainly preferable to being *you*, though.”

Before Kamijou could ask why, Stiyl continued.

“Your Imagine Breaker is like an eraser that removes the red paint. Anyone would notice their own painting being steadily rubbed out. In my case, I just don’t have to use any magic, and he won’t detect anything odd. But in your case he’d see a whole flood of oddities.”

“...Then what? Are you saying we’re gonna just go up to a building full of terrorists and politely ring the doorbell? Without any kind of plan? When we both have transmitters hanging from our waists?”

“That’s why you’re here. If you don’t want to get shot full of holes, then make sure you shield yourself with your right hand for your life.”

“The hell, you’re acting like this is somebody else’s problem! Isn’t it because you’re completely useless that I have to do all of this!?”

“Ahahah, no need to be so nervous. Your right hand is the only plan we need against that alchemist. It can even block and attack from St. George’s Dragon. And it’s useless to rely on me. I sent Innocentius to protect that child, and I only brought along one flame sword this time.”

“Waaaaahhh!! You really didn’t think this through!”

“Well then, what are you going to do? Are you just going to watch or are you going to go in?”

“...!”

Kamijou looked at the entrance. It was a thoroughly normal automatic glass door.

In fact, Kamijou really didn’t want to enter that place. That was to be expected. Who wanted to enter a battlefield that the enemy booby-trapped and was waiting? Besides, it was a main stronghold of a fanatical religion that nobody knew the truth about.

However...

If that was the case, then it was wrong.

An adult man would get goose bumps just looking at this entrance, and a single girl with a crazy name like Deep Blood is being locked up for a very long time in there. That was definitely wrong.

“Let’s go,” whispered the magician Stiyl Magnus.

Kamijou stood at the automatic door without a word.

He passed through the glass entrance, but a fully ordinary sight greeted him.

Many glass panes were placed throughout the whole lobby to let in a lot of sunlight. The lobby was fairly wide; it was about three stories tall, too. The building was a prep school, and this was its "outward" appearance. It wasn't a facility for the students. It was a place to attract guests looking to matriculate. That made the extravagant decoration understandable as well.

At the back of the lobby was a line of four elevators. The one on the end was a little larger than the others, so it was most likely used for bringing in luggage. A staircase was a few steps away from the elevators. It had few affectations, indicating that it was only there as a basic, minimal emergency stairwell.

It seemed to be a long break period at the moment—about the same length as a normal school's lunch break—the lobby was filled with students going outside to get some food.

Kamijou and Stiyl didn't draw much attention in particular. It wasn't like they were paying attention to the face of each and every student, either. Besides, even if they were discovered to be outsiders, they were still in the front lobby, so they could have just been there to request enrollment information.

(...I'm one thing, but this guy doesn't look anything like an exam student!)

Kamijou sighed. Though the person beside him was certainly young, he was also a ridiculous-looking, perfume-stinking priest whose hair was dyed red and whose ears and fingers were covered in earrings and rings. Preparatory schools were nevertheless businesses, so they couldn't exactly refuse service to someone.

For the time being, he couldn't locate anything notable.

Even the people coming and going didn't appear the least bit strange.

"Hm?"

For that reason, there was one gaping hole that stood out uniquely.

At the four elevators, between the first and second from the right, there seemed to be some human-shaped robot leaning against the wall. Actually, it was more like it had been set against the wall. Its hands and feet were crushed and broken. Whatever it was, it was laying on the floor, having been reduced to a lump of metal reminiscent of a traffic accident.

In terms of build, it was similar to a suit of western armor. However, its streamlined form was extremely modernistic like a fighter jet. It had quite an intrinsic design, and its silver shine gave him the impression that it wasn't just iron, either.

A giant bow, eighty centimeters in length, had fallen nearby, as if it was also part of the robot's equipment.

The word "Percival" was etched into the wrecked robot's right arm. Maybe that was its name.

However, it was clear to anyone who looked that this robot wasn't performing to its capacity anymore.

The hand and feet parts had been mauled and were bent back and forth, and a thick black oil that looked like coal tar was flowing from its damaged joints.

Kamijou's face instinctively scrunched up at the smell of rust.

(What in the world is that?)

First, he didn't know what that robot was. Security robots, cleaning robots, and other sorts of robots could be seen all over Academy City, but those all looked like oil drums. He had never heard of such humanlike, utterly inefficient robots wandering around.

Secondly, he didn't know why that robot was broken. He didn't know how strong it was, but smashing it into something reminiscent of a car accident would take a lot of force. What in the world had taken place in this cram school lobby?

And finally...

(...Why hasn't anyone nearby noticed it?)

That was what baffled him the most.

No one here was attempting to talk about the robot. They weren't even making eye contact with it. It wasn't like they were averting their eyes from something they didn't want to see or something they didn't want to remember. It felt like the machine was just a pebble lying in the road, something for which there was no need to go and pay any attention to.

It was like...

That damaged robot just mixed into their everyday life.

"What's wrong? There's nothing here. Anyway, either we find Himegami or beat Izzard. I think it would be wise to get moving," said Stiyl matter-of-factly.

"Ah... oh."

Kamijou finally took his eyes off the robot. No one was paying the least bit of notice to it, so he was under the illusion that he was looking at a ghost only he could see.

But that couldn't be right.

That robot really existed in front of Kamijou's eyes.

"What, are you worried about that? Oh well, that's true. It may be considered rare to you."

Stiyl seemed to finally notice what Kamijou was looking at.

"W-well yeah... Eh? Hold on, robots should be something from our Science side, right?"

Stiyl frowned at Kamijou's words for a short moment.

"What are you talking about? That's just a corpse."

"What...?"

Kamijou couldn't understand at all.

"Divine protection granted by the Surgical Armor and a Heavenly Bow Replica. This here should be one of the Thirteen Knights of the Roman Catholic Church. They're probably here to execute the heretic but it looks like they were crushed. For heaven's sake. Knights were an English specialty. That's what you get for plagiarizing it so badly." Stiyl shook the cigarette in his mouth. "...Tch. At any rate, that formaldehyde bastard sure did a number on them. That person set it up so they'd attack in a scattered way while members of other churches were all there. Was that guy purposely aiming for them to fail...? Everyone who came to clean up afterward would surely be the Church's best. Thinning those ranks by even one person would probably be a godsend for "that person", but..."

Stiyl was grumbling something to himself in vexation, but Kamijou didn't understand any of it, so he ignored him.

Instead, he looked at the "thing" collapsed on the wall next to the elevators one more time. That lump of metal looked like it was hit by a truck, and all of its limbs were shattered. That wreckage of the robot, spilling out dark red oil with its silvery metallic body destroyed.

No.

What if that wasn't dark red oil, but a fluid of an even deeper color?

No...

What if that wasn't a robot, but a human wearing armor?

“Why are you so surprised?” asked Stiyl, as if it was completely reasonable to see. “This is a battlefield. What’s so strange about seeing one or two corpses on the way?”

“…”

Kamijou was speechless.

He had known. He should have known. This was a battlefield where people killed each other. The enemy had already set up traps for intruders like Kamijou, and was waiting for them to walk in. Even Kamijou and Stiyl had no intention on negotiating with a vicious enemy.

Yes, he needed to have an understanding of that.

But while he understood it, he couldn’t stay silent about it.

“Damn it!”

Kamijou dashed forward. He didn’t know how running would help. The most he could do was wrap bandages; real first-aid treatments were beyond an amateur like Kamijou. First and foremost, he didn’t know whether the person inside the brilliantly destroyed armor was even alive. He also couldn’t think of a way to drag the person out of the thing.

Even so, there was no clear proof that the person inside the armor was dead.

If so, perhaps he could still save them if he worked quickly.

Kamijou spent only ten seconds to run from one end of the hall to the other. With the armor covering the person’s face, he couldn’t even tell what kind of expression they had. However, the faint sound of air escaping from the gap in the lump-like iron helmet reached his ears.

(He’s still breathing!)

As Kamijou felt relieved, he realized that he could not move the body carelessly and considered calling for an ambulance until he heard the sound of the metal doors of an elevator sliding apart.

A handful of boys and girls about the same age as him began to alight from it. They paid no mind to the near-dead person right next to them, as if it was an ordinary sight. They were laughing, talking about things like how expensive the school lunches were, and how it would be a better idea to buy convenience store bento boxes instead.

“Y...you...!”

The most important thing he needed to do was to rescue this smashed armor. He understood that. But while he understood it, he couldn't stay silent.

Kamijou inadvertently tried to grab a nearby student on the shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing!? Hurry up and call an ambula—"

However, he stopped before he could finish.

That's because Kamijou's hand had been forcefully dragged forward.

No...

It wasn't enough to describe it as a drag. It was like using a hand to grab a driver seat of a moving truck; it was of a completely different level of impact.

"Wha—!"

His arm was nearly dislocated.

But that's not why Kamijou was speechless. The student he grabbed hadn't been holding on to Kamijou's arm or anything. The hand he had placed on the student's shoulder had been pulled, like a balloon caught on a car.

On top of that, the student didn't even seem to notice that Kamijou had put his hand on his shoulder. And it wasn't just him. Nobody in the lobby seemed to hear him, despite yelling so loudly.

Just like the smashed suit of armor in front of him.

"What's going on?"

Kamijou recalled the sensation in the palm of his hand

The fabric of the student's clothing should have been soft, but it was as hard as if it had been soaked in instant glue that then solidified. No—he wasn't even close to pulling on the student's body, *he wasn't even able to press his fingers down onto the fabric.*

"That's what the barrier does. This place is like a coin; it has a front and back side. Those living on the 'front side of the coin', the students who don't know anything, won't notice a magician on 'the back side of the coin'. And those residing on the back side of the coin—we, the external invaders—can't interfere one bit with the clueless students. Look at that," sung Stiyl, pointing out the feet of a girl coming out of the elevator.

The floor. The dark red blood flowing out of the armor was spreading like a puddle, and *the girl proceeded over it like she was walking on water.*

"..."

Kamijou kept his eyes on her as she passed by. There weren't any stains on the bottoms of her shoes, nor did they leave red footprints. That pool of blood had been treated like it was hardened plastic.

"Hm."

Stiyl nonchalantly removed the cigarette from his mouth and pressed the lit end firmly against the plastic elevator button.

But it didn't leave a single bit of soot behind, much less any sign of the button melting.

"I see, so the entire building's on the front side of the coin? I guess that's how it should be, since this is more suitable to be a fortress that protects against magic. Kamijou Touma, it seems we're no longer able to open even a door with our own strength. Same goes for the automatic door at the entrance, so we're basically trapped in here."

"..."

A boundary.

Kamijou certainly didn't have much familiarity with the term, being from the Science side. But if it was a supernatural power, then wasn't this Kamijou Touma's time to shine?

Kamijou clenched his fist tightly.

Imagine Breaker. If a supernatural power came in contact with that right hand, it would have been negated, even the systems of God. It was a unique power among unique powers.

Kamijou clenched his fist and raised it high up into the air.

He then slammed his fist hard onto the floor, wanting to smash the boundary into pieces!

...Well, he slammed it down, but all he got was a dull noise.

"Hah! Myaah! Aaaah!?"

"What are you doing?"

Stiyl sighed in aggravation at the writhing Kamijou.

"It's probably like my Innocentius. If we don't destroy the core of the magic, we won't be able to break out of this boundary. And most likely... the core itself is placed outside the

boundary. That way, he can be sure that people locked on the inside can't turn the tables on him. Troublesome, indeed."

"Damn it." Kamijou was a bit perplexed at how to deal with that but asked, "Then what do we do? There's a wounded person right in front of us, but we can't call for a doctor or even get him out of here..."

"We don't have to do anything. That person's dead."

"Don't say stupid things! Check his breathing! He's still alive!"

"Yeah. He's definitely alive if we go by heartbeat. But, his fractured ribs punctured his lungs, his liver's crushed, and the veins in his hands and feet are long gone... he can't be saved in this situation. There's a word for people like him. It's a corpse."

Maybe he had investigated that with his runic magic, too. Stiyl's words were mercilessly clear, like a doctor giving the cruel truth to a patient suffering from an incurable disease.

"...!!"

"What's with that expression? You knew that right from the start, right? Even if he's breathing, he can't be saved."

A moment later, Kamijou was grabbing Stiyl's collar with both hands.

He couldn't understand it. Kamijou couldn't understand it. How could the person in front of him remain so calm? How could he say such words even in front of a dying person?"

"Move it. He doesn't have any time left—"

But Stiyl simply brushed away Kamijou's hands.

"—We also don't have time to push our one-sided sympathy onto a corpse. Sending off the dead is my job as a priest. Amateurs should shut up and watch."

"..."

An odd enthusiasm came from Stiyl's words.

Kamijou removed his hands without thinking and finally figured it out. He stared after the priest, who had turned his back to face the crushed and broken "knight", whose flame of life seemed about to be extinguished.

(He's... angry?)

It was a face unimaginable from his normal face full of sarcasm and scorn. But it couldn't have been anything else. Right now, Stiyl Magnus was not a magician. That back of his, wrapped in something like static electricity that might repel Kamijou if he touched it, belonged without a doubt to Stiyl Magnus the priest.

Stiyl didn't do any special ritual.

"..."

He just said one thing. It was in a foreign language, so Kamijou didn't know what it meant.

Those were Stiyl Magnus's words as a priest, not as a magician.

There must have been a lot of meaning in those words. Despite not raising a finger at all until now, the knight's right hand started moving unsteadily. He brought the hand up toward Stiyl as if grasping something floating in the skies.

"..."

The knight said something as well.

Stiyl nodded his head. Kamijou still didn't understand how much weight those words held. However, the tension in the knight's entire body melted like he had told the priest everything he needed to tell him. There was a contented, satisfied relaxation in him, as if to say that he had given up all his lingering regrets.

The knight's right hand fell.

The steel-clad hand rang against the floor like a funeral bell.

"..."

At the end, Stiyl Magnus the priest made the sign of the cross at his chest.

A ritual to send off a single human, regardless of whether they were Anglican or Roman Catholic.

And then, Kamijou finally realized something.

This was a real battlefield.

"Let's go!"

Stiyl Magnus spoke once more as a magician rather than a priest.

"It seems like we have one more reason to fight."

Part 4

He was feeling really bad.

Their goal for the moment was to search for rooms hidden in the gaps throughout the building. The closest one was in this south building, next to the cafeteria on the fifth floor, so they were ascending the cramped emergency stairs.

(Why do I feel like shit?)

Kamijou wondered as he climbed up the narrow emergency staircase. At first, he thought it was because of that knight. Then, he thought it was because that staircase was narrow and dark.

However, there was also another physical reason besides that psychological reason.

“My legs...”

Kamijou looked down at his legs that were showing fatigue for some reason.

The rules of the front and back of the coin. Magicians (and himself) who came in knowing everything weren’t able to obstruct the residents blindly going about their lives on the front. The building itself belonged to the front as well, according to Stiyl.

What that meant was that every bit of the shock that came from stepping on the floor rebounded back to his feet.

Basically, it was like the difference between punching people and punching a concrete wall. As they were walking on an overly hard floor, the fatigue build-up was two to three times faster.

“We... can only... pray... that the... enemy is in... the same situation...”

Stiyl seemed to be distressed at the rapid onset of fatigue as well. He had a large body, but apparently he hadn’t trained it for jumping or leaping in the first place.

“Damn...If it’s gonna be like this anyway, then wouldn’t taking the elevator have been a better idea?”

“We’re on the back side of the coin, so if you know some way of pressing the button on the front of the coin, I’d love to hear it.”

“...”

“Suppose we do enter the elevator as the door opened. What would you do if students on the front used it? We’d be crushed if a lot of them walked in.”

The people on the back side of the coin couldn't interfere with the people on the front side of the coin.

For example, even if a car on the back side of the coin rammed full speed into a person on the front side of the coin, the car would be wrecked while the human would be completely fine.

If they ended up being packed in like sardines in the elevator...

Then their bodies would be squashed in no time, just like a raw egg brought on to a train car packed to the limit.

(...Ugh, this is really getting more and more depressing.)

Kamijou lowered his head dejectedly. Now his dark thoughts were clashing with his accumulated weariness. It made him feel like his mind was about to split in half.

(Something fun...Can't there be something fun?) Kamijou asked himself, greedily desiring repose.

And there was.

"Oh yeah, what about phones?"

"What?"

"Well, I'm talking about the front and back of the coin. I was just wondering if phones would be able to connect," Kamijou said, bringing out his cell phone from his pocket.

Though he said that, Kamijou himself realized it was a facade. Strange things were happening one after the other. He felt like he needed his phone to bring him back to reality lest he would be driven insane.

He didn't hesitate on who to call.

His room—in other words, the room a girl was waiting in. As he was about to, though, he suddenly thought of something.

"...Wait. The bad guy won't detect me using my phone and come attack us or anything, right?"

"Who knows? But either way, I'm sure he already knows we've invaded. We just broke in through the front."

"If so, why weren't we attacked?"

“Not a clue. Maybe he’s got some leeway, or maybe he wants to kill us with one swift, certain blow. Well, this is *that* alchemist we’re talking about. He’s more than likely setting up preemptive measures to quash our counterattack.”

“...”

(In that case why was this guy so composed in this situation?)

However, since their whereabouts were likely exposed, there was no need to be careful. Kamijou decided to brazenly make the call.

The phone rang three times.

(So it won’t work...?)

The phone rang six times.

(...Looks like I’ll have to give up.)

The phone rang nine times.

(Hurry and pick up!)

Though he was feeling impatient, Kamijou didn’t want to hang up the phone. While he waited, he had another notion. What if it didn’t have anything to do with the front of back of the coin, and Index just wasn’t answering the phone? And hypothetically speaking, what if it wasn’t that she *wouldn’t*, but that there was a reason she *couldn’t*?

What if...

What if something happened to Index?

(In—!)

Just as an unfamiliar chill rose up Kamijou’s stomach...

The phone was picked up.

“He-Hellooo! This is Index Libror—wait, no, that’s not it, I’m sorry. This is the Kamijou residence! Hellooo!?”

Index’s somewhat absurd voice could be heard.

“Hey, let me ask you,” Kamijou said with the exhaustion of someone trying out a wrong diet. “Is this the first time you’ve ever answered a phone?”

“Yes!? Wait, huh? That’s Touma’s voice. Eh? Does everyone on the telephone have the same voice?”

Then, a knocking sound could be heard.

It was probably the sound of Index hitting the receiver, he head slanted in confusion.

Index, don’t start hitting the machine just because you think it isn’t working! That’s exactly how old ladies fix televisions.”

“...That’s strange. Only Touma could have said something that dumb.”

Kamijou retorted deep inside.

No doubt about it. This was Index’s first time using a phone (though she knew how to say “hello” and seemed to have *at least seen or heard other people doing it).* She probably panicked when the ringing didn’t stop no matter how long she waited. Then, finally, without any other recourse, she prepared herself and picked up the receiver. Something like that.

For a magic specialist possessing 103,000 grimoires, Index didn’t even have basic common sense when it came to science or technology. Kamijou thought that trait was charming, but it gave him something to think about at the same time.

He knew from his knowledge that Index had no memories from before last year.

Actions that seemed charming at a glance were actually deformities caused by her memory loss. It was pretty painful when he looked at it that way.

“Nyai? So, Touma, what’s wrong? Why are you using the phone—this excessive, gaudy, bothersome thing that’s bad for your heart? You must be really worried about something.”

“Ah, no—”

Apparently, Index didn’t consider phones to be commonplace.

“Ah, is it because one of the two lasagnas in the refrigerator was yours!?”

“You ate it? Oh well—”

Before Kamijou could continue, the voice could be heard again.

“Ah, there was pudding in the fridge...!”

“You ate it!? You ate it! You really ate it, didn’t you!?”

“But there was only one!”

“Don’t you have any regard for your landlord!? Those Kuromitsu House Bakery puddings were seven hundred yen a piece! Gyaah!” shouted Kamijou. “Urgh! W-well, fine. We’re getting off topic. Anyway, everything is fine if my phone connects.”

“? Touma, you didn’t need anything?”

“Nah. I just wanted to see if a call got through. I’m hanging up now.”

“???”

(Right now, Index should be tilting her head in confusion, right?)

“Ah, oh yeah. Did you know, Index? For every single minute you use the phone, your lifespan will be shortened by one day accordingly?”

“Waahhh!” came a shout as the phone suddenly cut off. She probably slammed the receiver into the cradle.

“...What a simpleton,” Kamijou said to himself as he turned his phone off, his retaliation for the pudding complete.

However...

“.....”

The magician beside him looked like he wanted to say something.

“W-what is it?”

“Nothing.” Stiyl exhaled a sigh. “It’s just that I feel that you might be too relaxed. This is a battlefield, and yet you’re chatting away nonchalantly with a girl. I don’t really care if you die because of carelessness; in fact, I’ll be dancing in joy, but please don’t drag me down.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Gu... Urgh...”

Stiyl fell silent, like sixty percent of the blood vessels in his body had ruptured. Kamijou began to understand how he should handle the person in front of him.

“...Yeah, I am.”

Kamijou felt his heart being pierced more than he thought it would at that phrase.

He didn't know why it shocked him so much, but Stiyl continued on.

"...Don't be mistaken. I'm not treating that girl as a target of romance." Stiyl wasn't looking at Kamijou. "I mean, you know, don't you? Until now, *she had a body that couldn't survive unless all her memories were erased at yearly intervals. So you get it, right? You at least know that many other people have stood in your position before.*"

"..."

"There were people that tried to become her father. There were people that tried to become her brother. There were people that tried to become her close friend. There were people that tried to become her teacher," Stiyl said as if singing alone. "That's it. That's all it is. In the past, I failed, and you succeeded. That's the only difference between us."

Stiyl looked Kamijou in the eyes.

It was as if he was staring at a dream—a future—that would never again be within his grasp.

"Although, I'd be lying if I said I didn't have any regrets." Stiyl gave another sigh. "*After all, it's not like Index had actually turned me down.* She just doesn't remember. If she did, she'd come jumping to embrace me."

Kamijou couldn't say anything.

If he had someone important to him...if that important someone lost all their memories...What if a completely different person was boldly staying at that clueless someone's side? Would he even be able to stay sane?

No, it wasn't just that there was a total stranger sticking with them.

Wouldn't he feel betrayed by that important person who had forgotten it all?

But the person in front of him still believed in himself and was trying to follow through with his convictions.

That was how strong he was.

Kamijou looked at his cell phone. It was just a five minute or so casual conversation. Someone had given up everything just for that, to protect someone precious to him, even though he knew he'd never reach her again.

The feelings of all those people...

Did the current Kamijou have the right to trample on all of those feelings and keep her to himself?

(...I don't know.)

If that were Index's only wish, Kamijou would protect it to the end.

But the main point was that Index had merely forgotten. How could a girl who didn't know that she had other options be expected to make decisions?

(I don't know. But Kamijou Touma really saved Index.)

Yes. If that was the case, he had to take up the burden of saving her.

Giving food to an abandoned cat on a whim and not taking it home, even though you know it'll die of starvation, was more wicked than the despair caused by rashly giving it the hope of maybe being picked up.

However...

(The one who saved her isn't the current Kamijou Touma—)

Whenever he thought about it all the way through, it always came back to here at the end.

(—Index is looking for someone else... the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma.)

Part 5

After climbing up to the fifth level, Kamijou and Stiyl stepped out into a hallway.

Stiyl had the sketched map of Misawa Cram School memorized. There was a proper meaning for them coming up here. It was on this floor that there was an apparent discrepancy between the building's paper blueprints and its actual size measured externally via infrared and ultrasonic waves.

Meaning they thought there was a secret room here.

"According to the blueprints, it should be nearby."

Stiyl lightly knocked on the completely ordinary wall in the middle of the straight hallway.

"...It should be, but if it ends up not opening, then we're shit out of luck."

"Yeah."

They couldn't open a single door on the front of the coin even if it *wasn't* a secret one in the first place, since the two of them were on the back of the coin. Entering and leaving rooms would require them to slip through the gaps left by students opening the door, but of course there wouldn't be anyone frequenting the hidden rooms.

"But it's best to verify their locations. However strong this barrier is, Aureolus is the one who made it. Dealing with the barrier is as simple as threatening him...We could just kill him if it comes to that."

"..."

Kamijou unwittingly glanced at Stiyl.

He understood that this was a battlefield, and that Aureolus was an enemy they needed to defeat. The situation wasn't frivolous, and all it took to know that were the fallen knight in the lobby and the fact that Himegami Aisa was being held prisoner.

Even so, part of Kamijou couldn't outright assert that he'd "kill" Aureolus, because it was also possible that Aureolus had taken down that knight in legitimate self-defense.

However, the magician in front of him was different.

He said "kill him", not "beat him" or "stop him". He just said "kill him", with no ambiguity in the words.

They searched for the room closest to where the hidden room seemed to be. It turned out to be a cafeteria. It was probably an illusion, a psychological trick—you messed with people's perspective by setting up a big room. That way, you could hide the existence of a small hidden space next to it.

The entrance to the cafeteria didn't have any particular doors.

Kamijou and Stiyl entered, cautious not to let themselves be swallowed up by the waves of people.

As it turned out, places with a lot of people were fairly problematic.

After all, those on the back of the coin couldn't intrude upon those on the front. Boys were playing musical chairs as they moved around what few seats there were. Crowds of girls were walking with their trays and talking to one another. They were all basically raging bulls charging at Stiyl and Kamijou. On top of that, the size of the cafeteria made it hard to predict people's movements, compared to in the hallways. They needed to strain their nerves to the limit just to avoid the flow.

Since it was evening, many students were in the cafeteria.

No one was looking at him—that sensation was fresh in a way. It was completely different from walking through a bustling train station like normal. When he was faced with this sight, he understood that people unconsciously avoid others normally so they didn't end up running into one another.

There was a counter on the wall behind the hidden room, and over the counter was a cramped kitchen. The industrial-sized refrigerators and cookware made matters worse, forcing the already-tight kitchen to feel even more confined.

(I get it. As long as you don't know the original size of the room, that would make it hard to figure out how much open space is on the other side of the wall.

"...Hm. It's my first time actually seeing a scientific religion but it doesn't look like much. I thought there would be framed pictures of the founder's face decorating the place or something."

Stiyl inspected his surroundings with boredom.

"...It's true that it doesn't look dangerous, but..."

Kamijou looked around as well.

In the world of science, there was something called a "cultic danger level list". It included, among others, a cult's "income" level, or to what extent it would collect possessions from its followers; its "expansion" level, or how forcibly it made new followers; its "absolute obedience" level, all the way to the point where even suicide bombing was a possibility; and it's "dangerous material-refining" level, like poison gas, explosives, and so on. Points would be assigned to each of those items and the ones with a lot of points would be classified as religions that presented a threat to science.

From a purely scientific standpoint, he didn't think that Misawa Cram School was all that dangerous. Since its subjects were students, the school couldn't easily collect a large amount of money from them, and prep schools weren't the best-suited places for refining poison gas or bacteriological weapons.

However...

"...No. This place is definitely a scientific religion," he said under his breath with spite.

Strangely, though the cafeteria was brimming with students, there was an oppressive air present in the room, like the kind in an elevator. That was understandable, Kamijou thought. Everyone in there *was just making noise—they weren't having enjoyable conversations.* For example, they discussed how much more one's grade had gone up after a mock exam, having outsmarted their fellow schoolmates, or how they just couldn't understand the trash that hadn't been studying whatever subject at this time of year. They could only laugh with one another by saying degrading, scornful things about others.

Kamijou looked at the posters hanging on the walls of the cafeteria.

They were pretty conventional for prep schools and university advancement cram schools. Lined up on the walls were illustrated, dichotomous statements along the lines of “Study now, pass the test, be happy. Don’t study now, fail the test, be unhappy.”

(It’s like a more positive version of chain mail.)

Chain mails were prank mails that promised good fortune by saying something like “If you send this mail to seven people within seven days you’ll find happiness.” Which, on the other hand, is a threat that *if you don’t, you will become unhappy*. That was the part that really stunk of cultism.

“...Hmph. The whole ‘we’re the smart ones for studying here right now’ thing is religious belief itself, isn’t it? After all, even during lectures, professors are always spouting stuff like ‘these are the essential points for this exam that you can only learn here. The only ones who don’t study here this summer are unintelligent, inferior beings.’”

It made him feel sick.

It really made him feel sick.

He himself was what made him sick for being able to understand this, if even a little bit.

To top it off, all in all, exams end up involving superstition. People try out weird foods that are claimed to improve your concentration despite a complete lack of empirical evidence, and people bring lucky charms in to pass tests all the time.

It was a deficiency called anxiety.

The scientific religion of that Misawa Cram School used a knife and stabbed it into that gap.

“Hm. You seem to be stricken by the cult’s virulence, but I trust you haven’t forgotten our original goal, right? For now, I want to see if we can just find the entrance to the hidden room.”

“Uh, yeah. Right. I got it!” Kamijou took a deep breath, trying to somehow calm his nerves.

After that, he took one final look around the cafeteria.

Immediately, about eighty students in the cafeteria turned to stare at him.

At first, Kamijou mistook that for him having raised his voice.

“This...could be bad...Are we going through checkpoint number one or what?”

So even after hearing Stiyl's serious voice, Kamijou was still unable to react.

"Ah, eh?"

"Don't space out. There's no way people on the front of the coin can see us on the other side. I see. This means there are automatic warning systems in place near the hidden rooms like this.

"..."

Kamijou looked around.

The students, eighty in number, were definitely staring at the two of them. Gone were their humanlike gestures; they simply stood there like poles, their eyes like lenses—inorganic.

"C-could they—"

Kamijou looked around. It was true. Eighty students were now on the back of the coin. And that meant...

"—Magicians!"

Stiyl had already taken a step back without him by the time Kamijou shouted in incredulity.

However...

"The seraph's wings are a shining light, the shining light is the immaculate white, which exposes sin—"

A single student, stiff as a pole, alone, started to murmur something he didn't know the meaning of.

"The immaculate white is the 'proof of purification, that proof is the result of' motion—"

A second voice overlapped the first.

"The 'result is the future, the future' is 'time, time is' uniform—"

A second voice, a third, a fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—!!

"Uniformity is all 'things, all things are created by the past, the past is the' origin, the origin is 'a singularity,' the singularity is 'sin, sin is man, man' 'fears punishment, fear' is 'crime, crime is' within the self, if 'within the self lies something to be avoided, then by the seraph's wings' 'the crimes of the self are' exposed and must burst out from within—!"

An eighty-person chorus—no, rather, a verbal maelstrom of the battle born of every human in the building, more than a thousand people, that could shake the entire battlefield itself.

A bluish-white light about the size of a Ping-Pong ball appeared at the brow of one of the students. Maybe it really was a ball—it flew through the air, its aim unclear, and dropped to the floor right next to Kamijou.

It made a noise a strong acid might produce and a chemical smoke rose slightly.

Maybe you could get away with only a burn if it were just *one* of those.

“Hey! Imagine Breaker! Time for you to step up!”

“What? ...Hey!”

He turned back around, and suddenly *there were hundreds of bluish-white orbs coming at him so that they blotted out his vision.*

“Uh, ahh—there’s no way I can deal with all of this!”

Kamijou ran toward the exit to try and beat Stiyl there. The magician pursued him, flustered, and they burst out of the cafeteria. He had thought Kamijou would be his shield.

“W-what are you running away for!? You’re the shield! Your right hand was able to fend off Dragon Breath, but you’re not even using it! You’re turning your defenseless back to them! Are you insane!?”

“What the hell are you talking about!? I don’t want to hear that from someone using me as a shield! This isn’t a case of quality but quantity! How can I fend them off with just a single right hand!?”

It was like fighting with someone that had four arms. Even if you put up a defense around your face when looking out for two arms, the other two would penetrate through to your wide-open stomach. This gang was too big for a loner to handle.

Tons of orbs surged out of the cafeteria toward them. It was like the cafeteria had been filled with water, and the floodgates were opened.

The two of them had no choice at the moment but to flee down the hallway.

“Damn. All things considered, he managed to use the Gregorian Chant, though this is a replica...I may have underestimated Aureolus Izzard.”

“What’s with that Gregorian whatever?”

“It was originally the ultimate weapon of the Roman Catholic Church. They’d assemble 3,333 monks into a temple and gather their prayers for one huge spell. It would cause the magic power to skyrocket, just like focusing sunlight through a magnifying glass.” Stiyl gritted his teeth. “There were only what, two thousand students here? It’s like that expression this country has. Dust that piles up can become a mountain.”

Kamijou was stunned.

Even though he knew that he couldn’t understand what Stiyl had said, but in the end—didn’t it mean that they were fighting against two thousand people?

This was a battlefield, and he was in the midst of the enemy’s camp. He understood that. But as soon as he thought about two thousand people turning on him all at once, his despair inflated.

“There’s no way I could win against them all at the same time!! The building may be big, but we’re still inside it, you know! You’re gonna get caught eventually if you play hide-and-seek with two thousand people!”

But Stiyl, still looking forward, answered, “That’s not for certain yet. The core...You need to control all two thousand people at once, or else the spell will fail. If we can destroy the key to that synchronization, we’ll be able to put an end to the Gregorian replica.

They continued to run down the long, straight hallway. When they finally got close to the stairwell, they could see another flood of blue orbs coming to attack them from the front.

They had been caught in a pincer attack.

“The stairs—move it!”

Kamijou and Stiyl frantically dove into the stairwell next to them. Kamijou intended to inquire whether they should go up and down the stairs, but he realized something was amiss.

“You... you’ve been looking so calm this whole time. Do you have some sort of secret plan?”

That’s right. Despite basically walking the line between life and death at the moment, Stiyl was far too calm.

“Hm, I do have a secret plan. It’s just that I’m wondering whether I should use it now.”

“Are you kidding me!? If you have one, hurry up and use it!”

“You think so?” said Stiyl, turning a deeply mischievous grin at Kamijou.

The smile was way too ill-suited for the situation; Kamijou took caution and unwittingly gulped, but at that moment...

Stiyl shoved Kamijou down the stairwell to the flight below.

“Wha...”

Before Kamijou could even thing, he lost his balance and hurtled down the stairs. A searing pain ran through his body as if he were being beaten by four or five people. He couldn’t even scream. If he did, he’d bit his tongue.

“Bad luck, scarecrow♪”

Stiyl’s happy voice could be heard from above. While dazed, Kamijou could see Stiyl running in the opposite direction, which was upstairs.

Right after that, the flood of orbs rushed in as if to split off the upper levels from the lower ones. Like a raging river, *as if completely natural, they settled their sights on Kamijou and stormed toward him—!*

“That bastard...!”

Kamijou forced his aching body to move and ran farther down the stairs.

What Stiyl had said passed through his mind.

This was Aureolus’ hideout, it was filled with his magic power. It was like a picture that was only covered in red. If Stiyl’s blue coloring was used, the enemy would realize that something was not right.

But on the other hand, if Stiyl didn’t use magic, nobody would detect his presence.

However, Kamijou’s situation was different. His Imagine Breaker continued to erase the red coloring. Stiyl could decide when he wanted to use magic, but Kamijou was like a transmitter that was always working.

Basically, the reason Kamijou was brought there was to be a disposable decoy.

He knew Stiyl had far too little in the way of plans to be attacking an enemy fortress, but he actually had this up his sleeve the whole time.

(...Damn it! Eh, hold on, something doesn’t seem to be right.)

An alarm was blaring inside Kamijou, but he couldn’t figure out what it was indicating. He didn’t even have any ideas. If there was something he had no idea about as an amnesiac, then that meant... Since it wasn’t something that Kamijou, who didn’t have any memories, could think of.

The pre-memory loss Kamijou was...

His knowledge was warning him about something.

At that moment, a fresh set of footsteps interrupted Kamijou's thoughts.

And it was coming from below, blocking off his getaway.

"...!"

The torrent of orbs was approaching him from above. He couldn't stop running at this point. He checked what was down there as he sprinted downstairs at full speed.

There was a lone girl, standing there like she was waiting for him. He'd never seen her before. He also didn't know where her uniform was from, but she was probably a student preparing for exams and was one or two years older than him. With round glasses and black hair tied into braids, the girl looked far and away removed from magic, let alone a fight.

"Crimes are punished by flame. Flame is governed by purgatory. Purgatory is made to burn sinners. It is the only violence recognized by God—"

However, what escaped from those sweet lips was an unpleasant voice that sounded like rusted gears.

Each time she formed a word, the pale blue orb at her forehead grew larger. The ball waited, eagerly and anxiously, for the moment it would exceed critical mass and shoot off like a balloon whose mouth was released.

The front and back of the coin must have been reversed. This girl should have been on the front, but now she stood on the back as a magician. That probably applied to every student currently inside Misawa Cram School. On the other hand, that meant if he moved immediately, Kamijou would easily be able to take her down.

(I can win this...!)

Kamijou clenched his right hand. He wouldn't be able to keep up with dozens or hundreds of them, but one or two orbs wouldn't present any threat. He gripped his fist as tightly as he could as if to reaffirm his power, the Imagine Breaker.

Then, with a cracking sound...

The girl's cheek exploded as if firecrackers were placed underneath her skin.

"What—!?"

As Kamijou stood there dumbstruck, the girl's fingers, her nose, and inside her clothing all made small bursts, one after the other. Each one of the ruptures was small, and they were ripping a few centimeters of skin off at most. However...

"Violence... is the affirmation of death. Affirmation, is... recognition. Re... cog... ni—"

The girl's body ruptured with every syllable she formed. The very lips forming those words ripped, and blood dripped from her mouth because even her insides might have been bursting apart. In spite of that, the girl didn't stop saying words. No—she *couldn't* stop. It was like she was a frog being shocked with electrodes, and its leg muscles were moving independently of its will.

(Don't tell me...)

The anxiety rose up Kamijou's stomach. His knowledge was telling him something. He didn't know where he had learned it, but this strange knowledge was saying something.

Espers cannot use magic.

Though espers and magicians were similar in that they could use supernatural power, the concept was different.

The brain circuits in espers were different from that of an ordinary person. Even though they do could similar things as magicians, they could not use magic.

However, this was Academy City.

All students there had undertaken the esper development Curriculum.

Then, assuming that...

What would happen if an esper, who couldn't use magic, was forced to use it anyway?

"Stop... it—"

Kamijou mumbled in spite of himself, forgetting what situation he was in.

Their circuits were different. That's what his knowledge told him. He didn't know anything about the inner workings of the occult, but it might be like trying to force a battery-powered Walkman to connect to a wall socket.

Since electricity was passing through it, the circuits would activate, but...

Wasn't that just unreasonable forcing the circuits to function while burning them out?

"—Stop it! You should know that your own body is in trouble!!"

At this point, he was forgetting to clench his fists. He forgot everything, despite looking down the end of a metaphorical handgun barrel, and darted all the way down the stairs.

"...tion, re—st wit... thin. Within... refers... to—the world. Connect your inner self with, the outside world."

The girl went on muttering something and then was suddenly silenced by a sharp splitting sound.

Her forehead split open, and the light blue sphere she had called forth vanished, what remained in its wake was only an open wound, out of which flowed crimson blood.

Maybe that did it. Her body shuddered, angled itself toward the steps of the staircase, and began to decline.

Something inside Kamijou whispered.

It said the human body was heavy, even if it belonged to a petite girl. If it was treated as luggage, things would be different. It told him that he wouldn't be able to escape from the deluge of orbs while carrying dozens of kilograms along.

Something inside him whispered.

Besides, that girl was the enemy. He'd get nothing in return for saving her, and it would also put him at risk of getting shot in the back. It was insisting that if he wanted to save himself, he must leave the enemy behind here.

Something inside him whispered.

And above all, it said, there was no more saving someone who had sustained all those injuries. Her wounds were fatal by anyone's measure, and the scientific religion had tainted her very soul.

(...)

Kamijou silently chewed on his back teeth at the echoes of the voice in his mind.

"Shut...up!!"

In spite of all that, Kamijou used all his might to reach a hand toward the girl about to tumble down the stairs.

The girl was certainly heavy. There was no reason he'd be able to escape the flood of orbs with a person on his shoulders when he *already* couldn't get away. He knew she was the enemy. He knew her body's wounds were deep and her heart's wounds graver still. That all went without saying.

Even so...

There was absolutely no reason to allow that girl to be dumped into the deluge of orbs approaching them from the rear. There would never be a reason for that no matter where in the world you looked.

She obviously wasn't doing all this because she enjoyed it.

She had enrolled here thinking it was just a prep school, and before she knew it, the scientific religion had corrupted her. In the end, she was being treated like a disposable tool before she understood what was going on.

Kamijou remembered the knight collapsed at the elevators.

If he had learned anything back there, it was that he couldn't possibly abandon someone about to die, whether they were an enemy or not!

"Guh... Damn it!"

The girl who fell into his chest was lighter than he had expected. However, he meant that in human terms. As an encumbrance, she was quite heavy. Adding to that, they were in the middle of a flight of stairs, so the footing was bad. He was about to plummet down them.

As he tried to hurry down the stairs holding on to the bloodied girl, he threw a quick glance behind him.

There was...

(...)

Like a surging flash flood, the rain of orbs was right in front of his face.

Kamijou immediately deflected the orb in front of his nose with his right hand, used his left to grab the girl's waist, and dashed down the remaining stars all at once. Well, he *tried* to run down them. Unfortunately, the unconscious human body was surprisingly weighty. It was like he was being told to swim with an iron ball attached to his feet.

He wanted to jump, but gravity pinned his body down.

Just that little lag caused the thousands of orbs to form a vortex around Kamijou.

".....!!"

Kamijou shut his eyes tightly out of reflex. He figured he could be a shield for her and defend against one or two of the orbs, but that was impossible with thousands chasing

them. His body would be eaten alive by the innumerable orbs, little by little, as if by countless insects, and he would melt like they were a strong acid.

"...?"

—That didn't happen. No matter how long he waited, nothing happened.

He was under the illusion that time had stopped. Kamijou didn't dare open his eyes recklessly. The strange delusion imprisoning him said that time would resume the moment he did.

But if he didn't open his eyes, nothing would happen.

With a fearful feeling that was similar to someone snipping the wire of a timed bomb, Kamijou carefully opened his eyes.

"...Huh?"

But even after opening his eyes, Kamijou still didn't understand what was going on.

He was under a weird illusion that *time had halted*. Because that was the only explanation. The orbs had come right up to his nose. He was about to be swallowed up by thousands of them. So *why exactly was the deluge of orbs stopped dead in midair like a paused video?*

At last, the orbs resumed their movement, like taut strings attached to them had been cut.

However, they didn't move to swallow Kamijou up in their fierce current. Instead, every one of the countless orbs fell straight down as if they were apples being slowly released from a hand. When they hit the floor, they melted into the air and completely evaporated.

Then, a set of footsteps could be heard.

Kamijou didn't know what was going on...but the noise was coming from the lower level. At any rate, he looked down from the landing toward where he heard them, as if he was investigating for an answer.

Downstairs, there was an exit to a hallway, and a light of the evening sun was shining into the poorly lit emergency stairwell.

And there...

...stood Deep Blood, Himegami Aisa, as if she were looking up at him from the bottom of a well.

Part 6

At that time, Stiyl Magnus watched as his used-up flame sword disappeared.

A single run card bobbed through the air like a sakura petal.

This was the hallway on a floor higher than Kamijou. It was a straight, long passage, and nothing about it was out of the ordinary, but Stiyl knew that the core of the Gregorian replica was concealed here.

He was a magician. To him, detecting the flow of magic was his specialty, so it wasn't difficult at all. Despite the students here having a meager amount of magic power, the core was gathering and controlling the power of two thousand people. It was hard for him *not* to pinpoint its location.

"...I see. So this is considered hidden, huh?"

Stiyl spoke under his breath, fiddling with his cigarette, relaxed.

Hiding something on the front of the coin equated to *absolute defense* on the back of the coin, because those on the back could never even tear the wrapping paper on a Christmas present if it was on the front.

For example, sealing the core inside the ordinary walls would give it an impenetrable bastion.

Even if the enemy magician found the place, as long as the enemy couldn't touch the core, it should be safe.

"However, that's only *if he was able to completely cover it up.*"

Stiyl looked bored as he puffed out smoke. His flames were formless. If there was a hole less than a millimeter wide born from the slightest warp in a wall or window, for example, flooding through it with 3,000 degree Celsius fire would be a piece of cake.

Common sense on the front of the coin didn't work on the back. If he had wanted to perfectly protect the thing, then he should have stuffed it into a vinyl bag or something and bound the opening shut.

Thus, Stiyl decided he'd try and destroy the core without even having seen what it was.

As a result, it seemed like he had managed to stop the Gregorian replica.

"...Still, though," he said to himself, waggling the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "This is his way out? That alchemist really has twisted since the last time I saw him. An escape route should be made by shedding your own blood, not that of other people.

An esper and a magician's circuits were different. If espers even tried to use magic, the unstable magic power would rip through the blood vessels and nerves in their body.

In actuality, even in this hallway, even at his very feet, there were numerous students collapsed on the floor. Some were still moving, and some were no longer able to do so. In addition, a dense, metallic smell wafted over to him from somewhere. If he peered into one of the rooms around him, there would doubtlessly be a hell dozens of times worse there to greet him.

The fact that his own words made mention of the students surprised him.

It was like there were still humane parts of him left to do so.

(...Is he contagious?)

Stiyl remembered the face of a certain young esper and grimaced.

At that moment, Stiyl could hear a very clear sound of footsteps coming over from the other side.

They were not in a hurry, nor were they trying to be silent. They were not concealing malice, and yet they weren't trying to assassinate him with a single, certain strike from the shadows.

If he had to describe it, it was like an opponent knocking on the door to his house before attacking. The smell of bold fearlessness, of absolute confidence in certain and total victory, was a declaration of war and a triumphant proclamation.

The owner of the footsteps spoke.

"It was inevitable. No matter where you might have hid yourself, I had conviction that I could lure you out to the core by utilizing the Gregorian replica." The footsteps did not cease. "It is obvious. There were two intruders...Where is the other? It is manifest. Has your familiar been swallowed by the Gregorian replica?

"I'd be really happy if he really did get swallowed," Stiyl sung back. "Unfortunately, he's quite a bit more stubborn than you'd imagine. And he's not really cute enough to be called a familiar, either."

The footsteps stopped short about ten meters down the passage from him.

Stiyl grinned once. Then he focused directly ahead.

Those eyes were not smiling in the least.

The footsteps' identity was the soles of a pair of Italian-made leather shoes. The tall legs stretching out from them and the slender body achieving two meters in height were both arrayed in an expensive, pure white suit.

His gender was male, his age was eighteen, and his name was Aureolus.

The color of his hair was green. The dyed color was a symbolic one representing earth, one of the five elements he controlled. His combed-back hair was the only thing that made the man, whose skin and clothes were both white, stand out.

His outfit was gaudy enough to be an object of ridicule. However, it was transformed into something very natural by the androgynous beauty the man possessed.

"Anyway, what's a guy not even meant for battle trying to lead me here for? You do know you wouldn't even be able to slow me down, right? Or are you perhaps hiding some dozens of magic items in there today, Curio Dealer?"

"..."

Those words seemed to be taboo to Aureolus.

Alchemists weren't meant for combat in the first place. In order for one to stand on the front lines, he would need to strengthen himself with weapons or spiritual items. Aureolus had to use dozens, if not hundreds of magical items to finally be able to stand face-to-face with Stiyl.

"That is incorrect. Can you not even discern, knave, that at present, I bring no magical items with me?"

"I'll bet. After all, this building is a sanctuary in and of itself. It's one huge lump of a magical item. The environment supplements you on its own, so you don't even have to use any to power yourself up. Hmph. So what? What is it you want to do? Even if you stay quiet, the sanctuary will fight for you on its own. You just have to borrow its power to get rid of party crashers. So just what did you come here to do? Or, should I say, *what can you even do?*

"You cur!"

"Your face is telling me that rubbed you the wrong way, but unfortunately, *I have no need for you*. So get out of my way. Your parenting style does irritate me somewhat, but there's no point in blaming you, is there? After all, it's the sanctuary that committed that sin. It would be cruel to demand retribution from you, wouldn't it?"

"You blasted knave—!"

With a motion like a snake slithering out of a hole, a golden blade leaped forth from the right sleeve of Aureolus's suit.

(An arrowhead...?)

Stiyl furrowed his brow. It was certainly shaped like an arrowhead, but it was as big as a smallish knife. The moment he concluded that it was a hidden weapon made for throwing...

“Limen—”

Aureolus’s right hand swung upward. The edge of the blade stared Stiyl in the face like a viper raising its head.

“—Magna!!”

Instantly, the thing shot out to attack Stiyl, flying straight as a bullet, aimed right at his eyeballs.

“...!?

The only reason he was able to instantly twist his body and avoid it was that he had guessed it was a throwing weapon but a moment prior. Had he thought it was just a knife, it would have pierced his skull.

Likewise, a golden chain was attached to the tail of the giant arrowhead.

As he swiveled, he looked at where the knife, now more like a giant golden snake, was headed. The chain was coming out of Aureolus’s suit sleeve, cutting through the air, and passing right by Stiyl’s face.

With the sound of fruit being sliced open, the tip of the arrowhead stabbed into the back of one of the fallen students.

...

Before Stiyl could think of something...

(...!?)

As if he had thrust the knife into a water balloon, *the student’s body turned into fluid and exploded.*

It almost looked like the body had been melted by a strong acidic solution, but no, that wasn’t just any fluid. It sparkled in a golden color—it was none other than pure, smelted gold.

The chain rewound itself with a swish, and the arrowhead danced back to Aureolus’s sleeve.

“It was natural. Do tell me what surprises you so.” Aureolus raised his right hand again. “My position is that of an alchemical master. Of course, I shall not allow you to claim ignorance of my name’s origin.”

Stiyl couldn’t reply.

The very technique that symbolized alchemy, the transmutation of lead into gold, certainly existed. But even if you were to use modern materials for such a grandiose technique, it would cost close to seven trillion yen and would require more than three years to perform. It was truly a hyperbole of magic.

But right before his eyes, Aureolus had brought it to fruition in less than one second.

It was the fastest ever—No, it was godlike speed, like a track record no one would ever be able to break again.

“Anyone who gets touched by my Limen Magna will be automatically be transmuted into pure gold. Any defense is ineffective, and any escape is impossible. Now bring out your weapon, Innocentius, scoundrel. I have strong interest in learning whether or not it can transmute that formless incarnation of flame.”

The golden blade poked its head out of the alchemist’s right sleeve like a cobra.

“...”

But Stiyl didn’t say anything.

He stood there frozen in place, like he was struck dumb by what he had just seen happen.

“Hmm. It is inevitable; you must be amazed before my Limen Magna, but do not end it here. I have not yet had my fill. Ten thousand deaths are not enough to repay your attitude five seconds ago, knave.”

“...Don’t be surprised? Well, that’s just impossible,” murmured Stiyl Magnus, dazed, like a child who had just seen a ghost. “Why on earth have you been doing something so pointless?”

“What...?”

The alchemist stopped moving.

“What are you surprised for? Magic is all in the experiment, not the results, right? Hmm. For example, let’s say there’s a craftsman who creates medicine in five seconds. But there’s still no variation whatsoever in the effects of that medicine.” Stiyl sighed at him with ridicule. “That’s what you’re doing. Limen Magna? How pathetic. My point is, what does something like that do any differently from spreading strong acid on a human and melting them?”

"...It is inevitable."

"I get that you've tried really hard, but setting Innocentius on this would practically be bullying a weakling. Besides, it's at home. I don't have the free time to use it in a place like *this*.

"...It is inevitable. You make me laugh!"

As if to erase Stiyl's scornful voice, Aureolus fired the Limen Magna from his right suit sleeve. His roar in itself could have supplied the force at which he fired it. It turned into a golden laser and left a stream of afterimages because its launch-rewind speed was just too fast. He may have been a magician, but Stiyl still had a human body. He could never follow the storm of bullets. It was reaching ten shots per second. As a result, six shots out of ten penetrated through him all over, from his face to his ankles, like a sewing machine.

The rune cards he was holding scattered and blew through the air.

However...

"And what is this? *Don't you realize that you're just one of the magical items yourself?"*

Despite his upper body being littered with holes, despite the arm-width hole straight through his face, he kept on speaking like he was bored.

"What... is this!?"

Aureolus, stunned, fired yet another Limen Magna. His bladed bullets, firing at ten per second, aggressively carved up not only Stiyl's already-shredded upper body but also his lower body, which was holding it up.

However...

"Yes, using Telesma to create a Celtic cross for a focus is indeed an obscure model. Certainly fitting for a former Roman Catholic priest. But the one I'm looking for is Aureolus Izzard. I'm sorry, Aureolus Dummy, but could you please stand down?"

Stiyl flickered. His body was now transparent enough that it seemed like it would disappear at any moment, but nevertheless, he was still standing.

"What do you mean? It is natural. I shall dissect your argument, beginning with its premise. It is obvious: The Limen Magna is my alchemic technique, and one I developed. It is evident; if that was not the case, then what would you say was the source of my power?"

“The real Aureolus Izzard, of course. Though I think it’s about time you yourself started to realize that something’s wrong. Well, it’s of no consequence. Then I have one question for you, Aureolus Dummy. What exactly was your reason for studying alchemy?”

“...That is simple.” Aureolus readied his Limen Magna. “The purpose of alchemy is nothing other than an investigation into truth. My own particular specialty is humans. How high can a human climb while maintaining his human form? It is that search that led me to knock at the gates of the schoolhouse.

If one were to paint his body with the belladonna plant, then he could raise his spell building and incantation speed by several degrees in exchange for destruction. He could even live for thousands of years if he buried himself in the Antarctic permafrost.

However, Aureolus pursued alchemy not as a way to exceed his limits via this abandonment of humanity, but instead to search for how far someone could ascend while retaining his shape and dignity as a human.

Aureolus was a descendant of Paracelsus, the magic doctor. He made that his raison d’etre and wore it proudly.

The magician, though, broke all that to pieces with his next words.

“Then why are you trying to make contact with something as inhuman as a vampire?”

“...”

“Hmph. See, you don’t know. You don’t know anything. You *really* don’t know anything—what Aureolus Izzard is doing or what Aureolus Izzard is trying to do. You are a fake who was only input with data beforehand. It’s impossible for you to comprehend the *error* that’s making the real thing twist around his own beliefs for.”

If he really didn’t know anything, how could he be the real Aureolus Izzard?

He should have been completely destroyed, but for some reason, the magician asserted this like he had already beaten the alchemist.

“And that Limen Magna. Even though it’s a magical experiment for performing research, Aureolus Izzard would never boast about the experiment itself instead of the results. Taking medicine makes a cold go away, but only children can rejoice at just that fact, right? Wasn’t it the duty of an alchemist to investigate which ingredients inside the medicine cured the cold?”

“Ugh... ah...”

If he wanted to deny it, he could have done so at any point.

However, Aureolus couldn't stop himself from listening. That was because the words the magician had said were like a jigsaw puzzle that patched up all the deficiencies in his heart. He found himself unable to ignore them.

"I can say it as many times as I need to. You're a fake. I'm only looking for the real Aureolus Izzard, not you. It would be easy to break one or two of his security devices, but doing so to something with the same face as an acquaintance puts me ill at ease. If you would leave, then you should do so quickly.

Aureolus Dummy couldn't take it anymore.

At this point, *he didn't even care* if he was a fake. He had finally acquired this one and only trump card by his own hands, and yet even *that* was borrowed goods? That's what he couldn't stand.

Aureolus Dummy intended to use his full power to crush the enemy in front of him, and raised his blade.

"And besides, you actually understand, don't you? You know that the alchemist Aureolus Izzard isn't weak enough to lose *this* easily."

He heard the voice from behind him.

At a moment, Aureolus Dummy felt warm air, like that of a heater, stroke his cheek. *Suddenly, Stiyl Magnus appeared out of nowhere.*

(A mirage...!?)

Aureolus Dummy immediately tried to back away.

A mirage is a phenomenon in which air is heated and expands, changing its refractive index. It's possible to hide yourself like melting into the air, and vice versa, to appear where there is nothing, like an image coming up on a screen.

The one at the mercy of Limen Magna the whole time was a fake. The real one had melted into the air to hide himself and had moved in behind Aureolus Dummy.

Aureolus Dummy seemed to see through Stiyl's tactic thoroughly in an instant.

If he had spaced himself properly, he would have been able to avoid the attack

However...

The fake illusion he impaled with the Limen Magna. Feeling empathy for that being, even for just a moment, not even a second, was his mistake.

Blank spaces in a person's thought processes leave fatal openings.

By the time Aureolus Dummy finally snapped out of it, Stiyl had already created a flame sword in his right hand. Not only that, he had also brought it straight down on him, cutting off his left arm and left leg altogether.

The smooth motion cut into his flesh like a knife slicing through butter.

Roasted by a 3,000 degree Celsius flame, the surface of his skin carbonized. It couldn't even bleed.

"Ugh... gah."

But something other than the physical pain was dominating Aureolus Dummy's mind.

"—And besides, you actually understand, don't you? You know that the alchemist Aureolus Izzard isn't weak enough to lose this *easily."*

The magician's words rattled his brain like a giant bell had gone off in his head. Yes. That's how it should have been. Aureolus Izzard *should* have been absolute, should have been invincible, should always win, should utterly crush his enemies, should no nothing of fleeing, should be devoid of the very concept of escape—he *should* have been an overwhelmingly perfect saint.

Then what was *this* unsightly display?

This was a coward. Hiding behind countless instruments, being frightened every time it's poked.

"A-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Aureolus Dummy lost all sanity.

Even after losing an arm and a leg, Aureolus Dummy still used the Limen Magna.

"!?"

Stiyl readied his flame sword to guard against the golden arrowhead. However, the Limen Magna flew off in an unexpected direction and stabbed through the students collapsed in the area one after another.

Immediately, the entire floor was filled with molten gold.

Aureolus Dummy thrust the Limen Magna toward the melted pure gold once again, and then he swung it around from there. As if it could also be used to manipulate that gold, the liquid was shaken from its singular pool by centripetal force and splashed out in all directions, much in the same way that a magnet could attract iron filings.

Of course, it included the area surrounding Stiyl Magnus.

“Tch!”

He brushed away the golden spray flying at his face without much thought. At the same time, he made his flame sword explode. The hundreds of drops of pure gold were far too many to take down one by one, but the force of the explosion blasted them all away in one go.

Stiyl sliced through the smoke that screened his surroundings with a newly created flame sword.

He didn’t see any signs of Aureolus Dummy, who may have escaped during the explosion. Stiyl hesitated on whether he should chase after him, but decided to give up.

That was because the superheated gold he had swept aside was lying across the hallway before him like a puddle of magma. It was only about five meters long, but he’d be set on fire if he failed a running jump.

It seemed his only recourse was to find a way around. Fortunately, Misawa Cram School was made up of four buildings, each linked by raised walkways.

Stiyl calmly thought to himself.

(There’s no place I can’t get to as long as I don’t mind making detours.)

Part 7

“It only looks bad. Her wounds aren’t deep. She’ll be fine if we treat them,” said Deep Blood, Himegami Aisa, calmly to Kamijou after he dragged the Misawa Cram School student, the girl with glasses and braids, through the corridor with him.

“B-but she’s covered in blood!”

Kamijou shouted back before he could think, staring at the girl lying on the hallway floor. He couldn’t tell what school her summer uniform was from, since it was dyed over with crimson. On her face, arms, and other parts, skin was visible; there were even places with torn skin clinging to her like a plastic bag.

“Her skin ripping only damaged her capillaries. If an artery had been severed, it would be far worse. Blood would come out like a geyser.

“How... do... you—”

(You’re not even a doctor—no even doctors wouldn’t know this without a detailed examination. How could you declare all this so smoothly?)

“I’m more informed about the flow of blood than others.”

Kamijou was stunned and automatically recalled the name of Himegami Aisa’s ability.

“Give me a hand.”

However, Himegami Aisa didn’t seem to notice Kamijou’s reaction. In order to care for her wounds, she abruptly began to remove the girl’s clothes, right in front of Kamijou, a male.

“Uwah, hold on...”

“Keep calm. It’s rude to the injured.”

He didn’t mean it like *that*, but when he considered it calmly, he thought being conscious of the naked body of a girl is pretty morally wrong in this situation. A doctor would get fired on the spot if he got excited in an operating room, after all.

The subsequent events were truly the handiwork of a doctor, an emergency responder. Himegami meticulously stopped the bleeding with a handkerchief. For the bleeding on the girl’s wrist that didn’t look like it would stop by pressing a cloth to it, she used Kamijou’s belt to constrict her whole arm and completely cut off the blood flowing from her artery. Unbelievably, she used the wounded girl’s hair and a needle from a sewing kit to stitch her torn stomach flesh closed.

Kamijou couldn’t do much. All he did were things like lifting the wounded girl’s arms to a position above her heart or pressing the handkerchief to the mouth of the wound, all at Himegami’s instructions. His hands were covered in blood just from that. It have him a strange sort of feeling when he thought about it being the blood from someone he was trying to save, rather than from someone he hurt.

“We’re done for now.”

Himegami made that declaration, paying no attention to the fact that her shrine maiden outfit was soaked in blood.

“Hemostasis is complete. Her blood will coagulate in fifteen minutes. Then her wounds will close. But the disinfecting is incomplete. She’ll be fine for about two hours. Bringing her to a hospital for further treatment would be ideal.”

“...”

Once again, Kamijou looked at the wounded girl lying on her side. She was about the same age as Kamijou, but her body, and likely her heart as well, had been ripped asunder to such an unimaginable extent.

It’s true that he should be happy that they managed to save her life.

However, they couldn't avoid the reality that she had lost everything else.

"We did what we could, now... we can only leave it to Academy City's technology."

Kamijou made that remark while looking at the girl's face. The tattered skin was hanging from it like torn vinyl from the internal rupturing.

Plastic surgery will be fine. It will heal if they use skin from her butt.

"..."

Himegami Aisa merely answered based on modern medicine, but Kamijou wasn't quite in agreement with it being okay to brink the skin on her butt to her face.

"Speaking of which, you were amazing before. Are you a certain doctor that operates without a license?[6]"

"I'm not a doctor."

Just as Kamijou was about to ask what she was, Himegami replied.

"I'm a magic-user."

"..."

(I feel like I've heard that before.)

It was true that she did rescue the wounded girl, so Kamijou brought to bear the biggest compromise he could manage.

"Err, which part of you is a magic-user?"

"I have a magic wand."

"Uh-huh...Hey! Isn't that a nightstick with a stun gun buried in it!?"

"It's made with a new material."

"Stop messing around!"

Kamijou cried somewhat stupidly before finally realizing something a moment later.

The injured girl in front of them had healed to the point they could take their eyes off her.

[6] Reference to the Black Jack manga.

Kamijou collapsed onto the floor.

It was something so simple, but it caused Kamijou's entire body to drain of strength. It felt good. It felt so good he wondered why he wasn't crying.

People had died. There were probably a lot of people who died in places he couldn't see. For every one or two they saved, the jaws of hell were unquestionably open and waiting for many times that number.

But no matter what, it was still something that was worth being happy over.

"Well, then..."

Whatever the situation, he couldn't leave this girl to die. Before doing something about Misawa Cram School and Aureolus Izzard, he should leave for the moment and call and ambulance.

"I'm going. Can't leave a wounded person in a place like this. And it'll probably be easier to have an ambulance waiting outside."

Okay. That sounds good. There is more than one wounded. If you prepare an ambulance ahead of time, you can make their trip to the hospital shorter."

"...Don't talk like it's someone else's problem. You're leaving here with me!"

"?"

Himegami looked at Kamijou, pure mystification plastered on her face. Was it because she had been imprisoned for so long? Maybe she couldn't even think about running away anymore.

"Eh, what I mean is that you don't have to be locked up in a place like this. Let's get out of here. In fact, that's the whole reason I came all the way out here!"

Himegami was unresponsive, and only revealed a frozen look of surprise.

"What is it? Did I say something weird?"

"..." Himegami said in a soft voice, "...Why?"

"Why? Do I need a reason to save others?"

"..."

Once again, Himegami stiffened in bewilderment.

Only this time, it seemed like she blushed—or maybe that was just an illusion.

“But I...”

Himegami Aisa tried to say something.

But then she was cut off by the sound of something slippery being hauled across the floor coming from the direction of the stairs. Ragged breathing, too. Kamijou couldn’t hear a voice, but he could feel negative emotions like hatred and fury just from its breath, like they were nails being hammered through his ear into his brain.

“Damn it, damn it! What is this *weight*? It is not acceptable. To think this mere *raw material* is dragging my feet...Keh-heh, feet? Have you come to drag me by the feet, Aureolus Izzard!? There aren’t even any feet left on me for you to drag! Aha-aha-ha...If every single damned one of them is making a fool out of me, then it is inevitable. I will melt them all...!!”

It was the voice of a man gone mad. It was grating, like the audio feedback caused by extreme volume.

Then with an extremely loud swoosh, and the sound of something being dragged, the man walked out of the stairway entrance and into the hallway.

“Uh...”

Kamijou couldn’t help but be speechless. It was a foreigner with green hair in a white suit. However, his left arm and left leg were missing from the sockets, and some kind of twisted golden poles had been forced into the open wounds to serve as fake limbs. He must have been experiencing a great deal of pain, but there was no sign of suffering on the man’s face. It was as if the floodgates of endorphins and dopamine had been opened in his brain. He wore a magnificent and oily expression, which mixed fury with anger and ecstasy with insanity, all to prevail over the pain.

The man’s right hand and distorted prosthetic left arm.

They were holding the napes of the necks of a baffling six bloody boys and girls, like he were carrying garbage bags, three in each hand.

“Hah, what is this?” The man looked at Kamijou with bloodshot eyes. “Why are you here, boy? Only magicians should be here, right? Are you an intruder as well? Perhaps a friend of that flame magician?”

The man shouted from three meters away, as if he was spitting. Kamijou, however, didn’t move.

“You... these people...”

“It is obvious. They are only materials. Alchemy requires materials. So why are you looking at these materials? How strange. You are within the sight of Aureolus Izzard and

his Limen Magna. I should be perfect. Why do you have such composure? Am I at fault for something?"

Kamijou jerked back at the words "Aureolus Izzard".

However, Himegami Aisa, who was next to him, maintained her expression.

With the one who was holding her captive—the alchemist who should have been the very symbol of absolute terror.

"How sad." she spoke, her face still perfectly calm. "If he hadn't realized it. He could have stayed as Aureolus Izzard."

"Guh...!? Y-you wench!!"

Aureolus Dummy's howl was accompanied by a giant, somewhat gold arrowhead flying out of his right arm's sleeve. The arrowhead quickly revolved around the alchemist, and the strung-out golden chain stretched out to form something that looked like a shield—

—as it pierced through the bloodstained students Aureolus Dummy had been carrying.

The gold arrowhead melted the six pierced students into liquid in a flash, and their bodies turned into a yellow fluid. It wasn't just any liquid. It boasted a metallic sparkle reminiscent of mercury and released burning-hot vapor into the air with a bestial hiss, proving it was metal smelted by high temperatures.

"Wha...What the hell!? Do you have any idea what you just did!?"

Even faced with that sight, Kamijou Touma was *only* looking at the melted students.

Aureolus Dummy shuddered at the fact that the boy wasn't even noticing his killing move.

"It is only natural—death!"

With a shout, the arrowhead and chain spun swiftly around the alchemist again. The golden mud surrounding him whipped up into the air as if by the violent gale winds of a tornado.

It was both a wall and a tsunami. It created a blossoming tidal wave moving in all directions and reaching up to the ceiling, with Aureolus Dummy in the center, like a meteorite dropped into the sea.

Suddenly, in his peripheral vision, he saw Himegami move.

She crouched down on the floor without a sound, then proceeded to retreat, holding the collapsed girl. She was wobbling unsteadily, but she was not in a panic. It was like she knew just backing up a few meters would put her out of range of his attack.

Fortunately, the melted metal was more viscous than a liquid; it was like melted chocolate. He got the impression that it wouldn't spread around the floor very much if the tsunami was to crash.

Kamijou followed Himegami, who was holding the girl, and took a step back.

But just then, the arrowhead pierced through the heart of the golden tsunami, leaving a perfectly circular hole behind. It rushed toward him with incredible force.

"...!?"

He wanted to avoid it, but his body was already in the process of backing up. At this point, he couldn't recover his posture. The only method he had of dealing with the attack shooting right at the middle of his face was to use his right hand to immediately grab hold of it.

The sound of flesh ripping came from inside his hand.

The golden arrowhead wasn't so easily caught. It backed away and returned back to the golden tsunami. His right hand, sliced into two layers, felt as hot as if a cooked sheet of metal had been held against it.

A moment later, the tidal wave fell apart and surged toward him at a stretch.

Kamijou leaped backward and rolled onto the floor, and somehow he managed to escape from the scorching sea of metal.

Kamijou and Aureolus Dummy were separated by the golden sea, which was roughly three meters long.

(...Damn it, I don't have... any feeling in my hand—!)

Kamijou gritted his teeth. It was hard for him to clench his fingers into a fist. The right hand that could negate the systems of God couldn't even deal with a small knife.

"It is...disheartening. What...is that?"

Standing beyond the drawn curtain of golden tsunami, Aureolus Dummy was actually even more flustered than Kamijou. It had gone beyond confusion and into the realm of stupefaction.

The golden arrowhead in the man's hand broke to pieces like a crumbling sand castle.

It had reacted to the Imagine Breaker in Kamijou's right hand.

That arrowhead should be something that was imbued with some supernatural power, so it had gotten destroyed after Kamijou's hand had touched it. The wound on Kamijou's hand was caused by the blade just before it got destroyed.

"It is impossible. What is that right hand? It should be unmistakable. Why is it not transmuted? It is evident. My Limen Magna is the ideal form of many variations of alchemy. Even the schools of Bohemia and Vienna gave it up as hopeless, impossible to realize. Then it is utterly peculiar. By what *illegality* does it reject my theories?"

(Limen... Magna...?)

Kamijou thought vaguely, scowling at his open wound pulsating to the rhythm of his heartbeat. The alchemist said "transmute." Was he talking about the golden, metallic lava?

"Hah, what pleasure. Ha-ha, what pleasure! You interest me, boy! Just what mysteries hide within that body? Allow this magic doctor to open up your body and reveal everything about it!"

Aureolus Dummy waved his right hand horizontally and produced a new golden arrowhead.

Eyes sparkling with animosity, the alchemist aimed the tip of the bladed tool right between Kamijou's eyes.

(Here it comes...!?)

Kamijou instantly readied his right hand over his face; the arrowhead had already closed to within a hair's breadth of his forehead. He had wanted to hit the thick of the arrowhead right away, but an acute pain shot straight through his fist.

"Tch!"

In attempt to at least deliver a counterattack, Kamijou tried to grab the golden chain, but before that, it reacted to his right hand and shattered like a glass ornament.

The apex of yet another golden arrowhead appeared from out of Aureolus Dummy's right sleeve.

Before Kamijou could even think of escaping forthwith...

Aureolus Dummy began to fire a continuous stream of the blades, as if his sleeve were a machine gun.

They were fast. The time it took for Aureolus Dummy to fire, the arrowhead to break, and for him to ready the next shot was under a fifth of a second; it was impossible for a human to keep up. But Kamijou couldn't carelessly flee, either. He knew that averting his attention for a split second, to speak nothing of turning his back on it, would give the arrowheads the chance to puncture vital spots on his chest and face.

Luckily, though the arrowheads were moving fast, the trajectory was relatively simple. It would continue to shoot out in a straight line. It was a lot easier to predict the trajectory than against a boxer who could send in straight punches and hooks.

"Ggh-ahhhhhhh!!"

Therefore, Kamijou had no alternative but to use his right hand to rid himself of the arrowheads, even though it meant he would be slashed. As far as he could tell from the previous "transmutations," he'd just turn into melted gold if he used anything but his right hand.

As a result, it didn't take long before Kamijou found himself surrounded by the wreckage of broken arrowheads and chains.

"Hahahahaha! What a delightful specimen you are. It is neither a magic-devouring curse nor are you equipped with the Lance of Longinus. You really do use just your bare hands to crush my Limen Magna!"

On the other hand, Aureolus Dummy was laughing from the bottom of his soul, without caring that he couldn't annihilate his enemy despite swinging at him with his best move ten or twenty times. He was like an explorer who had arrived in an untrodden, uncharted land.

"Not enough. Haha! Boy, I do not have enough moves to measure your limits!"

As one was crushed, another one formed anew and accelerated toward Kamijou. It sliced through the air, trying to pierce his body.

Kamijou's right hand was already drenched in blood; he couldn't even clench it properly.

(This...is ba—!)

It could cleave off a finger. He stiffened up as fear crawled down his back, but the golden arrowhead unexpectedly drilled right past Kamijou, who was late on his reaction.

Had Aureolus Dummy missed? No, he had no such optimism.

Himegami Aisa was standing behind Kamijou, holding the wounded girl.

“Hime—!”

He twisted around immediately and started to shout to her, but he was far too slow to counteract the passing bullet. The arrowhead was already on a precise collision course with the center of Himegami’s forehead. Deep Blood should have been the object of Aureolus’s ambitions, but he must have lost his ability to tell who was who in his delusional state.

In front of him was a shocked look on Himegami Aisa’s face.

Kamijou tried to call to her...

The sound of the golden arrowhead tearing through flesh rang out.

There was a cry of shock, and Kamijou wasn’t clear about whether he was the one who made it.

Even that was beyond his comprehension—that was how gruesome and unexpected the sight before him was.

The golden arrowhead didn’t hit Himegami Aisa.

The tattered girl Himegami had been supporting...It seemed difficult for that wounded girl to lift even a finger, but she had immediately reached out her hand to defend Himegami’s face.

The golden arrowhead was stabbing deeply into the palm of her soft hand.

And yet the girl lightly tapped Himegami’s chest with the other hand without showing a hint of pain. The shrine maiden faltered a little, then took a step away from the girl.

The girl whispered something quietly. It was very weak, and he couldn’t tell what she was saying.

But the girl was smiling.

It wasn’t a smile for herself—it was a weak smile made to reassure someone else.

And just like that, the girl whose name he didn’t even know was transmuted into molten gold.

In that moment, Kamijou yelled.

He didn’t even know what he shouted. The roar was enough to tear a hole in his throat. For better or worse, the alchemist stopped what he was doing in surprise and took an extra moment to rewind the golden chain.

Kamijou grasped it with his hand.

Yes—*not with his right hand, but with just his left.*

Kamijou's intuition was telling him that the arrowhead was the only part that performed Limen Magna. The chain wouldn't have the kind of power to transmute anything into gold. If it did, then he wouldn't be launching the arrowheads straight at him—he'd be swinging the chain around. He could cover a much larger area that way.

"Ugh...!"

Naturally, Aureolus Dummy tried to pull the chain back to his hands. It was pulled taut like a game of tug-of-war. In a crazy twist, Kamijou stomped his foot down onto the tense chain.

Aureolus Dummy himself was pulled a little bit toward him.

And in front of him was that which he had made himself—the sizzling lake of melted gold—!

"Graaaahhh!!"

Aureolus Dummy had involuntarily taken a step into the golden puddle, and he immediately tried to jerk away. But he couldn't. The chain had become a chain to bind him, and it wouldn't let him back up.

Screaming, he extended the long chain hidden in his suit even farther. In doing so, he finally succeeded at removing his foot from the gold lava. His foot had only been buried for two seconds. However, his right foot—the only one he still had—had already been burned so much that everything from his ankle down was emitting hissing smoke.

Perhaps knowing that he couldn't use the chain as a bind, Kamijou's bloodied hand let go of the chain.

Would it be wiser to flee or to attack?

It was only for a moment, but Aureolus Dummy hesitated—and in that moment, he witnessed something unbelievable.

Kamijou lowered his body slightly. It was like he was trying to spring as far as possible on his legs...to vault over the golden pool, then to rush at the alchemist.

He had let go of the chain, but that act had nothing to do with it holding him down or not.

It was only to clench his fist, so he could beat down his enemy. He had forsaken it just because it would hamper that movement.

But no matter how you looked at it, that would be impossible. A straight line drawn across the pool would be three meters long. It would be one thing if he got a running start to leap the gap, but he could never cross it without that.

Even so, Kamijou's eyes didn't have any hesitation.

It was as if he was asserting that even in the case of failure, even if his body was to sink into the golden lava and burn up, he would spend what was left of his time tearing his enemy apart.

Those naked emotions, driven to a peak, alerted Aureolus Dummy to the danger...

The next moment, Kamijou jumped without hesitation.

While his leap looked like self-destruction, it wasn't aimed at Aureolus Dummy.

But at a window frame in the hallway, letting in the setting sun

Kamijou placed his feet on that tiny ledge and dashed straight for him!

"...!"

Aureolus Dummy immediately attempted to respond, but Kamijou had already leaped off the window frame, from the very highest position, as if to fall upon him.

Aureolus Dummy's survival instincts were telling him to quickly attack back and use the golden arrowhead to shoot him down. But just as the alchemist frantically raised his Limen Magna, he realized something.

Kamijou Touma had jumped overhead and was about to crash down.

If he used the Limen Magna to shoot him down—the boiling golden lava would rain down on him!

"How dispiriting! A mistake...!!"

He had no time to pay any mind to how he looked, his pride, or even the burn on his foot.

Aureolus Dummy instantly rolled back, dodged Kamijou's attack, and turned to run.

He felt pain at turning tail on an ordinary person, one who wasn't even a magician. However, that was entirely overshadowed by an even bigger sense of dread.

He fled for now, tumbling on his ravaged feet into the darkness.

Part 8

Aureolus Dummy slowly bumbled down a long, long hallway that seemed to go on forever.

The boy grabbing the Limen Magna was all it took to make it lose power and break to pieces. However, that wasn't the issue. The golden arrowhead was nothing more than a terminal, a body of hardened aether; the actual Limen Magna was the fortress Misawa Cram School itself. Even if a terminal's magical power was depleted, the fortress just needed to resupply it and prepare a new aetheric form,

Thus, that wasn't the reason why Aureolus Dummy ran away.

It was that boy's right hand. He couldn't see the bottom of its power. He felt like no matter how much magic power he poured from the main body to the terminals, it would all be eaten. If the arrowheads kept breaking like that, then would it not drain the fortress of all its power at some point? *That* was how strong the danger at his back felt.

"Damn...it..."

However, Aureolus Dummy could still think. Both Stiyl and that boy, despite Limen Magna being ineffective against them, were avoiding the golden lava itself.

"...Which means *I need enough gold so they cannot avoid it, even if they understand where it's going*. Hah, I have 1,982 materials on hand. It is evident. There is no reason that wouldn't defeat them."

However spacious it happened to be, they were still inside a building. It wouldn't be hard to wash a large amount of gold down from the top floor, causing the lower floors to all be swallowed up by the muddy stream, just like a dam break.

He enjoyed that image. The mere act of imagining it seemed able to drive away his unpleasant mood.

"Haha. Destruction, destruction! Destroying destructive destruction with destructivness! Yes, I shall not die yet. Deep Blood—yes, with such a splendid research specimen within my reach, I cannot possibly die! Haha, no! Not only that—there are still thousands of people worthy of investigation, hiding in this world, are there not!? Haha, how wasteful it is that that boy must die before I unveil the truth behind the mysteries of his body!"

Fortunately, he had already called all the school's students onto the back of the coin. All he had to do now was assemble all that material into one place. He just needed to pierce them all at once after that. But then he suddenly realized something. The core of the Gregorian replica, which had been manipulating the students, had been destroyed by Stiyl's flames.

“Wherever I go, there’s something in the way...!”

His roar cut through the air like a heated sword.

But the sound of footsteps behind him sounded like an even sharper blade.

“...!?”

If there was someone watching, they would have seen the illusion of Aureolus Dummy’s back shrinking visibly in the blink of an eye.

In normal situations, human psychology would cause one to avert one’s eyes from fear. Of course. Nobody wants to be close to something unpleasant or painful, nor do they want to accept it. So they try to pass it by, even avoiding letting it into their sight.

However, those footsteps would not allow even the most natural of physiological reactions. An almost hopeless murderous intent dwelled within them. If he averted his eyes and displayed weakness for but a moment, he would end up dismantled into a hundred pieces.

Therefore, Aureolus Dummy’s only choice was to turn around. He wanted to run for his life. He couldn’t endure any more pain—and yet he was forced to turn around, as if someone were manipulating him like a puppet.

There...over there was...

Ten meters away stood Kamijou Touma, looking like a savage beast that had just escaped from an experimental lab.

“What...on—”

Aureolus Dummy couldn’t comprehend it. He believed he was flawless. He could never comprehend a human with the power to hunt him into a corner like this.

However, Kamijou Touma was truly there.

“...Enough screwing around, you bastard.”

Aureolus Dummy scowled at the words falling out of Kamijou’s mouth—his voice sounded like he had been struck with cold rain, you wouldn’t even know which one of them had been cornered.

Kamijou had seen hell. He had seen off someone dying right in front of him, and he knew that many people in other places had died as well. And despite all that, he was able to save just one injured girl. But this alchemist had swiftly melted that one redemption, stealing it from him.

Yet Kamijou didn't talk about any of that. He stared down the enemy—if he had time to say anything more, then he had time to do something more important first.

His malice was like burning steel

"Eek."

Aureolus Dummy frantically readied a Limen Magna. That action wasn't out of battle intent, but instead out of fear. Unfortunately, his reaction gave Kamijou the last push he needed.

Silently—Kamijou's feet exploded off the ground toward him.

Aureolus Dummy, his face twisted in terror and panic, fired off the golden arrowhead to at least prevent him from advancing. The attack was aimed at his face, but Kamijou brought his body low, like a spider, and effortlessly dodged it. He didn't even slow down in the process.

"!?"

Aureolus Dummy's panic ballooned even further. But even while panic was affecting his abilities, he could still keep up the pace of firing and rewinding six Limen Magna in one second. He easily withdrew the arrowhead into his hands and fired a second shot aimed at the face of Kamijou.

He was already crouching. There was no available way out.

But this time, he swung the back of his right fist up and batted away the body of the arrowhead. It and the chain both shattered to pieces like an ice sculpture. It was such an accurate interception that it seemed like he'd known from the start the arrowhead was coming there.

Lowering his body had been bait to lead the opponent's aim. By showing a fatal opening like that, *Aureolus Dummy would be forced to attack there.* It was much easier to deal with a straight assault whose trajectory he already knew than the lawless back-alley fights where he didn't know *how* many fists would be flying at him.

There were ten meters between them. Kamijou had based his ingenious move on the assumption that he wouldn't be able to close that distance by dodging just one strike. But on the other hand, it wasn't a distance far enough for him not to be able to close after two—!

"Agh!"

Aureolus Dummy, twisting in surprise, shouted out as he tried to fire for a third time. But before that, Kamijou's right fist landed a direct hit on the alchemist's face. Kamijou

didn't slow down yet. He continued, driving his own forehead into the jaw of the enemy who was a head taller than him.

Having taken two direct hits in the head, Aureolus Dummy couldn't help but crumble to the floor. He tried to roll on the floor to evade the situation, but Kamijou wouldn't allow that. He stamped down on Aureolus Dummy's fake golden right leg. Then he twisted his foot and ripped it off.

A sound like fruit being crushed resounded from the open wound into which the gold had been jammed.

"Gyyyyyaaaaahhhh!!"

Aureolus Dummy screamed out in pain and released the Limen Magna at Kamijou, who tried to straddle him. But unbelievable, he latched onto the chain with his *left hand*. *Not to break it—only to grab it*, never giving the slightest thought to the possibility that he'd be turned into melted gold if he made one wrong move.

Kamijou swung his left hand around farther, and wound the golden chain around his own arm. After completely blocking the Limen Magna's movement, he looked down at Aureolus Dummy from above.

(It is astonishing... If this keeps up, I'll get killed)

Aureolus Dummy's judgment was quick. He chose to remove the golden chain that was hidden in suit. Kamijou had been balancing himself with that opposing force, so he staggered back a bit. Aureolus Dummy used that opening to roll along the floor and get out from underneath him. His mind was screaming. The Limen Magna hadn't been destroyed. He had *willingly let go* of the very proof of his own existence. That fact was trying to crush his heart into pieces.

He should have been able to keep his life in exchange for everything he was. No—it wouldn't be fair if it didn't. But he couldn't move any longer. Now that his fake leg had been yanked out, he could barely even walk.

"..."

As he crawled away, Kamijou then slammed the golden chain into him with all his might like a whip. The heavy blow drove all the air out of his lungs, and he writhed in agony on the floor.

Kamijou was silent.

Without a word, he closed in and put his foot on Aureolus Dummy's back. He took the golden chain and wrapped it around the neck of its owner. All he had to do now was to pull on the chain, and he would strangle the alchemist. It would be impossible to break the bone with his nondominant hand, though.

Kamijou felt nothing about his own actions. Rather, he wasn't able to. His mind was white-hot and empty, and it was like reality itself was losing its color. However...

"H...agh...—he...lp..."

With those words, the boy's brain was robbed of all its heat like he'd just been drenched with cold water.

Kamijou knew it was a selfish desire. Just how many people had that person killed? That question led him to only one choice. Even a children's live-action hero wouldn't feel any kind of hesitation.

But Aureolus Dummy was weeping, and his face was wracked with tears.

He knew he would never be able to escape, but he still exerted himself to reach out with his arm and to try and crawl.

Kamijou remembered then—the knight they had left behind in the lobby; the students, whose bodies were bursting while they recited the incantation as they became parts of the Gregorian Chant replica; the one girl whose name he didn't even know who had shielded Himegami and was turned into burning hot gold.

He knew the path he must take.

Silently, he channeled strength into the hand gripping the golden chain...

But all he could do was let go.

Aureolus Dummy slithered across the floor and crawled away from him—as if fleeing from a human-shaped natural disaster; as if lamenting the misfortune that had befallen him, while at the same time giving thanks to the fortune that had allowed him to live through the day.

That boy was *human*. Killing was something he just couldn't do.

♦

Aureolus Dummy no longer knew which floor of the building he was on.

He had tumbled down a few flights of stairs, but he couldn't even do that anymore. He had no strength left. He rested his back against the wall of the dimly lit emergency stairwell and stared stupidly at the one hand he still had.

It was ever since that boy punched him. It felt like every bit of the power that had supported him until now was being stolen. The exhaustion felt like an energy cable supplying him from a different location had been altogether severed.

It was then that Aureolus Dummy truly realized.

He wasn't a human. Without the external barrier supplying him, he couldn't even stand up.

He was the same as Limen Magna: mass-produced and easily expendable.

"Ah..."

Groaning at the dulling sensation in his fingertips, he was, at the same time, *fulfilled*.

(Why is that? Limen Magna aside, my body aside, just what in God's name is that right hand, which can erase magic just by touching it?

Aureolus Dummy's eyes sparkled with the intellectual curiosity of a boy looking through a telescope for the first time.

His question. How far could humans rise while retaining their human bodies and their dignity?

He had a notion that he had seen that limit. Not only in that extraordinary ability, but in the boy himself, who could still feel human anger and human sadness, despite possessing that sort of power.

Thinking about it that way made him able to accept this humiliating end.

There was no reason for a scholar to keep living after he learned the answers, after all.

Footsteps were heard.

Aureolus weakly looked up the stairs, and saw Stiyl standing there.

"It is dispiriting...Are you not through killing me?" The alchemist laughed at himself. "Leave me be, and I shall naturally waste away. You have no reason to kill me in the first place, do you?"

"That's right. To put it bluntly, I have no use for someone like you, since you're not particularly involved with *her*," Stiyl told him in a disinterested tone. "Ah, right. One of the Thirteen Knights was near the elevators before. But that wasn't something you did, was it?"

Aureolus Dummy looked up at Stiyl atop the stairs from his resting place on the wall.

He wielded Limen Magna. Even if it could melt any physical material into gold, it couldn't hope to physically crush the Surgical Armor of one of the Thirteen Knights.

"...Hah. If you put it that way, then it is evident. You know I have not killed a single person."

"What?"

"It is obvious. It's just a loser's boast. Struggle to understand what I said." The edges of Aureolus Dummy's mouth turned up. "So? Why have you appeared here, beside me, for whom you have no use? Can you not allow me to rot away naturally?"

"It's the complete opposite, idiot. I'm here to send you off. Could you stand rotting away like this?"

"..."

Aureolus Dummy stared blankly at Stiyl's face for a few moments.

Then, he chuckled.

It was unusual for this man, but he undoubtedly chuckled.

Though he was a fake, Aureolus Dummy was a scholar. And now, having found the answer to the greatest question—having completely investigated the limits of the human body—he was brimming with an unparalleled satisfaction.

But he still had a little bit of time left.

His life would expire within no more than ten minutes.

Aureolus Dummy was a scholar. In that empty time, he would notice something. A new mystery. The next question. The unimaginably sweet and beautiful research material lying beyond.

He didn't have time to absorb himself in research, though.

As a scholar, noticing a mystery and then dying without being able to put effort into researching it would be the equivalent of hell. It would linger. It would be a regret he couldn't get away from.

That's why Stiyl was saying this:

Shall I send you on your way before you discover that sweet mystery and writhe in agony?

"Heh." So Aureolus Dummy chuckled. "You knave. I cannot tell whether you are an angel or a demon."

"They're essentially the same thing anyway. The only difference is who they follow."

Stiyl slowly descended the staircase.

"*Fortis931* — I prove why my name is the strongest here."

He bared his jet-black robes. Runic cards fluttered out of them like sakura petals.

"Your magic name, is it," Aureolus Dummy lazily noted under his breath as he watched Stiyl come down the stairs.

(Now that I think of it, what was my magic name?)

Aureolus Dummy remembered it.

"Ah, yes."

(*Honos628* — My honor is for the world.)

The name he had charged himself with. The name he had constructed himself with. He finally remembered it and narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Shall I say a last prayer as a priest, alchemist?" asked Stiyl Magnus. He had come down the stairs and walked up to the alchemist.

"Do not sing, you dammed magician."

The moment after Aureolus Dummy answered, Stiyl's flames shot into the alchemists mouth.

They entered the alchemist's body quickly and completely scorched his insides. If there was a hole on his body, fire spouted from it. But it didn't stop there—he split into and upper half and lower half, and the flames that came out of him from there blasted his upper body away like a rocket.

Part 9

Meanwhile, in one room of the student dormitories—or to be more precise, in its bathroom—the runaway girl (or rather, Index) was staring down the stray cat (or rather, Sphinx). It seemed like this calico cat had been raised by someone before. In other words, it had no charm. If you threw a ball of yarn, it wouldn't chase it down. If you said its name, it would just stay curled up under the table. If you were trying to eat, it would snatch some of your food. Well, that last one was serious business. The food Kamijou Touma made meant a lot to Index—or rather, the girl with the bottomless stomach.

With this and that, Index figured she should completely retrain it. She did away with her collusive mood and was in the process of covering the cat with bubbles. Incidentally, she had just dreadfully tried out the bathtub's automatic water-heating function, following the friendly instructions Kamijou had left her.

(...But I wonder where Touma went?)

There were a few questions on her mind. The first was about the phone call. It wasn't that he'd only wanted to know if the phone was connected, it was his attitude—she'd selfishly eaten his pudding, and he let it go with just a "whatever."

And speaking of his attitude, it was the same story with this uncharming cat bristling its hair at her.

Fundamentally, Kamijou would never do something he didn't want to. He was the kind of person to try and work out his own solution, even if there was no other way.

And yet, he let two things he found undesirable pass. It'd be weird if she *didn't* think something was up.

Having made up her mind, Index nodded her head. She got out of the bath and wrapped herself in her habit, the Walking Church, and then made her way to the front door. Without thinking, she opened it—and *then* considered. Even if she asked Kamijou, she still wouldn't be able to find out where he was. She hadn't even thought about calling him on the phone. She'd admit it: Using the telephone was a concept far beyond her understanding. Especially the one in the Kamijou residence—it was the kind with the fax machine built in. It had so many buttons on it that she didn't even know where to start.

Would she give up? But as she turned to reenter the dorm, she suddenly caught something out of the corner of her eye.

Something like a tarot card was hanging on the wall.

It was the rune card that the magician Stiyl Magnus used.

"..."

Index stared at it silently.

Something had happened. Something was definitely taking place somewhere she didn't know, and she had been left behind again.

She thought back to that transparent boy she had been reunited with in the hospital room just a few days ago. The same despair and panic that she felt back then started to burn its way through her heart.

She ran. The only thing she could do was to chase him.

Luckily, Index had the knowledge of 103,000 grimoires in her mind. She knew the workings of Stiyl's magic. The runes were a variety of magic where the magician needed to keep sending magic power back to them or else they wouldn't work.

Putting it simply, there was a line. A slender one, like the sort connecting the body and soul during an out-of-body experience. She couldn't use magic, but she could detect it. There was no reason she wouldn't be able to follow it.

With that, Index darted toward the battlefield, forgetting to even close the door...

...without realizing that she would actually be the one to ignite more trouble.

CHAPTER 3

The Master, Like a Closed World's God.

DEUS_EX_MACHINA.

Part 1

Stiyl Magnus was heading for the topmost floor of the north of the four buildings.

The decoy he had set loose, Kamijou Touma, might have drawn the enemy's attention more than he anticipated, because no one was coming to him. The magician had gone full hermit mode, confirmed the locations of the doors to all the secret rooms, and succeeded in learning something important.

Deep Blood, Himegami Aisa, was apparently not, in fact, being locked in one of those rooms.

As far as he could tell from the dust and remnants of magic at the entrance to all of the hidden spaces, there was no trace of anyone going in or out of them, whether on the front or back of the coin.

Aside from Aureolus, he also hadn't run across any personnel, like subordinates or soldiers. This didn't seem like the kind of environment made to imprison someone who could run away at any moment.

That made things troublesome in their own right. If Himegami Aisa wasn't being confined against her will, and she *was* following and cooperating with Aureolus Izzard, then that unknown Deep Blood ability might be turned on him.

(...Damn it, why are espers so hard to handle?)

Thinking about it, Stiyl suddenly thought of that boy who was sent out as bait.

Stiyl personally felt like there wouldn't be a problem if he were to die back there. He had informed him that they weren't allies right from the start, and he had even declared he would use him as a shield.

But in that moment after he shoved the boy down the stairs, he had made a betrayed face.

He looked like he had been backstabbed by a trusted ally.

"..."

Stiyl attacked him with a flame sword upon their reunion and then dragged him into a war zone of swirling death against his will. Despite all that, that boy considered Stiyl to be trustworthy?

That fact dug into Stiyl somewhere in his heart.

Though it was a small thorn, it made him pretty irritated for some reason.

(...Damn it, why are espers so hard to handle—!?)

That's why Stiyl was running up the narrow emergency stairwell.

It was really no use to think this, but...Now that the boy was his decoy, some stinking *human* part of him was whining that he needed to achieve something worthy of that, and...

"It is unclear. Why in the world do you hurry so?"

All of a sudden, a cold voice flew at him from behind.

"..."

Stiyl came to an abrupt stop.

He was running up a narrow emergency staircase. He obviously couldn't have missed passing by someone, so what was that voice at his back?

It was as if the man's voice had suddenly materialized out of thin air.

"..."

He turned around slowly, realizing deep down that the fact that someone got behind him without him knowing already foretold lethal consequences.

There, he saw...

♦

"Hm, so this is the place."

As the purple hue of night began to blend with the evening orange, Index arrived at Misawa Cram School. It looked like a totally normal building, but that was weird in and

of itself. She had followed the magic power from the rune set up in the dormitory back to its owner, and it brought her here. And yet, the thread of magic cut off right at the wall of the building.

If she were to say it, then it was clear as day that it was abnormal inside the building, but something was forcing it to appear ordinary.

Just as magic power exists in people, so does a "power" exist in the world.

In Christianity, it was known as "God's Blessing". In the magic cabal known as Stella Matutina which formed the model for modern Western magic, it was known as Telesma. However, the nuance is closest to the concept of ley lines in eastern feng shui thoughts. As that name implies, there were lines that spread out like blood vessels and run throughout the world.

Of course, just as people's magic power is similar to gasoline refined from their life force, the world's "power" has little strength on its own. (Then again, its strength obviously far exceeds that of a human's magic power because a planet's lifespan is so much longer than a human). It is transformed into the gasoline-like "rays" via shrines and temples and turns into a vast source of energy.

The power that filled this world was like air, ordinary people (including magicians) couldn't feel it. The only ones who could are those who specialize in the field, such as diviners or feng shui masters.

However, there was none of that force in the four buildings towering over her.

The normally undetectable world power was like air. But in the same way one struggles to breathe when placed in a vacuum, Index was struck with an indescribable feeling of wrongness.

To put it simply, the force everything is filled with was absent in those buildings.

It was like a giant headstone for the world cut into a square—a tower of dead magic.

The building probably had a barrier to prevent magic power from leaking outside, but this was going too far.

Kamijou's right hand tirelessly and continuously destroyed the world's power, but that wasn't anywhere near this bad. His destruction was in harmony with nature—almost like a dead tree returning to the earth and forming the roots of a new life. That's why Index hadn't caught onto it until he had actually destroyed her Walking Church.

But this magic tower was different.

It was a man-made abomination, where the forest had instead been razed to build a city of stone and steel.

Why didn't that runic magician realize it?

Maybe he couldn't sense it because he was a runic magician who was himself a furnace for vast amounts of magic power. Kind of like how if you're used to thick, flavorful foods, you lose your ability to notice slight variations in taste.

But Index couldn't refine magic power. For that reason, this subtle, mild difference of taste was enough to give her goose bumps.

"It's not a barrier to protect oneself against enemies entering, it's a barrier of death to prevent enemies who have entered from escaping...Hmm, the model case for that is kinda like the pyramids in Egypt..."

As she muttered to herself, the nun in white passed through the automatic doors.

She had no reason to stop there.

It was bizarre, and that's why she had to bring the boy out of there as soon as possible.

The second she took a step in, the air around her changed entirely. It was like walking into an air-conditioned store after being in the boiling-hot sun. The bustling, peaceful city streets had suddenly been switched with traces of an empty battlefield overflowing with death. That certainly wasn't incorrect. In the back of the wide lobby, on the wall with the elevators, there was a knight armored with Roman Catholic ritual implements lying dead.

Index drew near with trepidation and inspected the knight.

The ritual implement, the Surgical Armor, used magic to absorb and disperse the impact from physical attacks. Since that was the main feature of the armor, it was in turn weak to magical attacks...but this one had definitely been deliberately rocked with something physical, in spite of that.

(...Did they not know anything about magic, or did they do it because they had a taste for that kind of thing?)

Of course, looking at this building that replicated the grave of King Khufu, she knew that the former was out of the question. The latter presented its own set of problems, though. How had someone broken through a Roman Catholic Surgical Armor with brute force? Had they summoned an archangel via Telesma, or where they skilled at creating metallic golems?

In any case, she couldn't leave the boy in a place like this. It smelled to strongly of death to let a magic-ignorant amateur get lost in here.

Then she heard something being dragged along, coming from her side. Index looked in that direction. There was an entrance to the emergency stairs next to the wall the elevators were on. From there she heard the slithering of something being pulled across the floor, in addition to ragged breathing.

"Who's—"

Before she could finish her question, the thing crawled out of the stairway exit.

There was something there. Not someone, but something. It clearly wasn't a person. Its bottom half had been ripped off, its left arm was missing from its shoulder, the right half of its face had been blown away, and the remaining parts had been carbonized, toasted to a crisp by high temperatures. Something that could still be moving despite all that couldn't be called a person.

She could swear the half of a face faltered for a moment.

For some reason, it looked like it was tilting its head in confusion...and the instant Index thought it was out of place, it used its one remaining arm to slam on the floor and fling itself at her.

"...!"

Without saying anything, the thing flew over immediately, and Index could only frantically backtrack. However, she tripped over the collapsed knight with her leg. Her body toppled over with it. The thing, having momentarily lost its target, was about to fall from its position and land atop Index, and—

"Shatter."

Suddenly, the frozen space resounded with a dignified male voice.

It was instant. The elevator wall across from her crumpled like a paper door, and a man's hand reached out from it. The large fingers grabbed the thing's carbonized, half-destroyed head like it was grabbing a ball.

Then...

Before Index's upturned eyes, the thing's body shattered, just as the voice had declared.

The scene looked like hardened ash falling apart. Three fissures split the thing's body first, then scattered it into the wind like powder snow. Before it all came down on Index's face below, ever bit of it melted into air.

“Open.”

The voice again. The door torn from within opened to either side. *It was distorted. There had been no pockets for the metal door to fit into.*

The ultimate magic, which would overwrite the nearby reality according to his own words.

“It can’t be...” Index whispered, flabbergasted. As if he paid no mind to her, a tall man stepped out of the elevator. He had combed-back green hair and wore a stark white Italian suit and expensive leather shoes.

“Well, well. We meet again, though I suppose you do not remember even if you hear that. It is unavoidable. You would have no recollection of the name Aureolus Izzard. No—in fact, for me, that must be none other than a godsend.

There were many marks on him that looked like mosquito bites covering the neck of the man seemingly trying to make small talk. The concept of acupuncture needles—those eastern medical instruments—would at first seem to be out of place with a westerner, but that wasn’t actually the case. There was a story about the founder of the western magic organization, Stella Matutina, willfully adopting Buddhism.

“Well, even should you not remember, I shall not go without saying it. We meet again, Index. As always, you appear to remember nothing, and as for me, I am most pleased to see you haven’t changed.

The man reached out his hands as if to blind Index, who was looking up at him, dazed.

The magic hand—the one that had smashed that thing that was neither human nor monster in one fell swoop.

However, Index couldn’t move a muscle. She only said:

I-it can’t be... Ars Magna?”

The man responded with a gentle smile.

Part 2

“Let’s go back already.”

After Kamijou joined up with Himegami by going all the way around the four buildings for lack of a way to cross the golden lava, he expressed his opinion to her in an utterly exhausted voice. “I beat that Aureolus guy. I didn’t kill him or anything, but he’s done

for. He definitely can't fight anymore. It's not his physical wounds—His soul is dead. So let's go back."

He had lost something he needed to protect. He couldn't save the students being used for the Gregorian replica anymore. He had settled the score with the alchemist. He didn't have a reason to keep fighting. He wanted to go home as fast as he could and be away from this whirling death zone.

(I want to go home. I want to go home now and have dinner with Index. Everything is fine if I'm with her. If I can see her again, *I can still go home*. Before I get pulled back into this war zone...before this world where death and slaughter is normal takes me prisoner...If I don't go back to my world, my everyday life, I will lose it all.)

Kamijou's thoughts were vague, but he was certain of them.

But evil shadows were settling into his weary head.

One was that, according to Stiyl, Index had been losing all her memories every year.

One was that, according to Stiyl, Index found a new partner every year.

One was that, according to Stiyl, Index forgot about that, too, every year.

It was obvious when he thought about it, but there, Index was smiling...

...And all around her were so many people who needed her.

He hadn't said it out loud, but Stiyl Magnus had been saying this between the lines:

Don't get the wrong idea. That girl isn't your property or anything.

"...Ugh"

Dizziness assailed Kamijou all at once, and he put his hand on the wall. The thought that he was looked at here as one of those many others around her gave birth to the sensation that his path back to a normal life had been cut off.

(...What a sick desire to have a heroine.)

Kamijou knew that glimmers of self-hatred in extreme situation can slide into self-destructive wishes, like self-sacrifice and feelings of suicide. He intentionally took a deep breath and calmed himself down, then decided not to think about any of it—he realized that if he walked any farther down that road, it would inevitably destroy him inside.

(For now, let's take Himegami and get out of it.)

Kamijou sighed as he thought that, however...

“That Aureolus Izzard was definitely a fake.”

Himegami Aisa said that matter-of-factly.

“What?”

“A body double. I’ve seen the real person before, so I know that. The real one wouldn’t kill indiscriminately.”

Himegami’s words slowly but surely sank into him.

She was right. Now that he thought about it, it was strange. He knew that the alchemist was using Misawa Cram School as cover—if he had all the students destroy themselves for the Gregorian replica, that cover would be blown.

Nevertheless, Kamijou’s mind jammed on the brakes. He wasn’t thinking clearly. He’d already decided to go home. That’s why he was able to keep his cool. Reentering the battleground despite that was an order he just couldn’t comply with at this point.

“Wait, just wait! What are you talking about? I definitely took down Aureolus Izzard!”

“I said it before, that’s a fake,” Himegami maintained definitively. “The real one always uses acupuncture needles. He didn’t have any, so he was a fake. And besides. The real one isn’t that crude.”

Kamijou couldn’t accept that. He didn’t want to. His logic developed from the basis of his desire to go home, so he couldn’t possibly concede the existence of any more enemies right now.

“However. The real one has no interest in anything but his own goal. If you want to leave, he wouldn’t stop you.”

Himegami’s words were just too calm, and they finally put a stop to his internal complaining.

But she just said something odd.

“Wait a sec. You’re coming with me, you know? Aureolus would never let us leave as long as he’s intent on keeping you.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’?”

“I didn’t mean, ‘Why wouldn’t he let us go?’ I meant, ‘Why am I coming with you?’”

“Wha—?”

That put him at a loss. This late in the game, now that they’d finally evaded the enemy for the time being, Himegami apparently still wasn’t thinking of getting away from this school.

“Don’t take it the wrong way. I have my own goal. It isn’t to get out of here. I can only realize it if I’m here. Or rather. It would be more correct to say that the goal is impossible without that alchemist.”

Her words were decisive. It even sounded like she viewed Aureolus as an acquaintance.

Kamijou wondered what was going on.

In psychology, it was mentioned that it was possible for an odd sense of solidarity to develop between a criminal and his hostage in extreme situations like kidnappings and barricading incidents—was this like that?

“But whatever your goal is, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t see you as a friend or anything. If he did, he wouldn’t be locking you away and barricading himself in here.”

That was before Misawa Cram School was hijacked.” Himegami’s eyes were resolute. “Did you hear what kind of treatment I got here originally? Like why there are hidden rooms all over the building? You are probably too normal to endure it.”

“…”

“After the alchemist came, the hidden rooms stopped being used. I’ve just been here. I haven’t left only because I don’t feel the need to. If I just left the barrier, I would call *them*.”

Kamijou thought back to Stiyl’s ramblings from before they entered the building.

This place was a barrier, perfectly concealed to look like a featureless, ordinary building from the outside.

Deep Blood.

Vampires were a legend among magicians, and she had the power to kill them instantly. Was she...

“Then what is it? Are you telling me you’ve been hiding here the whole time in order to avoid needless battle? Since you didn’t want the vampires or whatever to notice you?”

"...My blood. It doesn't just defeat them. It lures them with a sweet scent. It invites them. It gathers them. It kills them. My job is that sequence of actions, like a vividly colored bug-eating plant. It's who I am."

Kamijou's eyes widened.

Vampires—they caused even Stiyl to shiver at the taboo of just speaking their name. Himegami Aisa—she had an immense power that could smash even vampires to pieces with one blow. But when she said that, her voice had the loneliness or standing out in cold rain.

"Do you know what vampires are like?"

Even if asked, Kamijou didn't know. What came to mind was a mental image of an evil creature that attacks people in picture books, and besides, the word "vampire" didn't even strike him as real.

"*They're the same as us*," Himegami said, however. "They're no different. They cry. They laugh. They get angry. They get happy. They smile at others. They can take action for others. They're people like that."

Himegami smiled softly, as if she was remembering something pleasant.

"But," she continued, her smile vanishing instantly. "My blood. It kills them. Without exemption. They cry. They laugh. They get mad. They get happy. They smile for others. They can take action for others. Those people. Without even one exception—*it destroys them*."

Her words dripped with blood.

It was the voice of someone who had crushed every enjoyable memory before her eyes.

"Academy City is a place to control powers. So I thought they would know the secret behind this power, too. I thought if they knew the secret, then there would be a way to remove it, too. But I didn't find any of those things," she told him. "I don't want to kill anymore. If I must kill someone, I decided I would kill myself first. So it's fine this way."

The one girl, named Deep Blood, said this all by herself.

"But that..."

"Please don't say anything. Besides, it's not all bad. Aureolus said he could create a simpler barrier. It's called the Walking Church. It's a barrier in the form of clothing. If I wore that, I could walk through the city without calling them to me anymore."

"..."

"I have my goal, and Aureolus has his. We can't accomplish our goals without each other. So I'm okay. Aureolus cannot do me harm as long as he wants to grant his own wish. If you want to leave this battlefield by yourself, I'll lend you my aid. I'll explain to Aureolus."

Kamijou could not say anything anymore.

He didn't understand what suffering this girl was going through. He didn't understand how to save her. He didn't know what he was supposed to do.

"...Just...tell me one thing." He didn't know, so he asked her. "When we first met, if you didn't want to call vampires, why did you leave here and binge eat?"

"It's simple. Aureolus needs me because he wants a vampire. If I continue to stay inside the boundary, I can't summon one."

"But isn't that completely different from what you wanted? Don't you not want to hurt vampires? If so, why would you accept that order—"

"Yes, but Aureolus promised me that he won't hurt them even after he gets them. He just wanted their help."

"...The hell. And here I thought you were trying to escape from Misawa Cram School."

"...A question. Even if I was running. Why did you come all the way here?"

"I obviously came to rescue you. Do I need a reason for that?"

Kamijou's expression turned sulky, making Himegami's eyes grow large.

She was making a face like she got a present for her birthday when even she had forgotten about it.

"That is strange. But nothing's wrong. Because I'm not being locked up. SO you can rest easy and go home. No problem." Himegami smiled a little. "Aureolus said he has someone he wants to save. But his own strength isn't enough. No matter how much he tries, he needs their help. So I promised him that I would use my power. Not to kill but to help. For the first time in my life."

"..."

Was that true? Even if *she* wasn't telling any lies, it was more than possible that Aureolus was. After all, he was a murderer. This vortex of death and slaughter was something he created. There were too many places where what she was saying and the reality in front of him didn't add up.

But even so, if...

If Aureolus Izzard *was* the person Himegami Aisa said...

"...He can't do that."

"?"

"If Aureolus Izzard is really how you say he is...if he still hasn't become a complete monster and has even a little humanity in him...then I can't let him *make any more mistakes*. I'm not gonna say that people who mess up once are beyond all help, but if you let Aureolus go on like this, you're really going to regret it."

Himegami didn't say anything.

She should have actually realized it, too. There was a gap forming, separating the ideals Aureolus embraced from reality. It was plain to see just by looking at this battlefield. His very ideal to do no harm was going down the drain.

"This is criticism. By what thoughts would you offer objection to my ideas?"

However, just then a man's voice befell them, cutting Kamijou's thoughts short.

The ringing voice was like a sanctuary in itself. It disrupted Kamijou and Himegami's chat and brought forth silence.

It was a soft voice, like someone had whispered in his ear. The voice's owner, though, was nowhere to be found. He could only express it as a voice that did not use air as a medium, completely violating the laws of physics.

Footsteps could be heard from behind Himegami.

But they were at least thirty meters down the straight hallway.

There shouldn't have been anyone there.

There shouldn't have been anyone there, but when Kamijou blinked once, someone was indeed there.

There was nowhere he could have hidden.

He stood there placidly, as if to say he hadn't been concealing himself from the beginning.

"You..."

Kamijou doubted his own eyes.

From out of the void appeared the Aureolus Izzard that he should have already beaten, and with all his limbs attached—in fact, he didn't seem to have a scratch on him.

(Did he use some special skill to heal himself?)

Kamijou wondered that, but that would be strange too. No matter how he recovered from his injuries, humans couldn't change in *quality* like this. Though he had the same form, the person inside didn't feel the same, as if Kamijou were looking at a twin brother with a different personality.

And this overwhelming presence.

Despite Aureolus being thirty meters down the hall, the very fact that he was there weighed down on Kamijou to the point of despair, like he'd already slid a knife between his ribs.

A human incarnation of the term "the real thing", along with all its connotations—that's what was standing there.

(This is dangerous. He's dangerous. He's the game master. There's no way I can beat him by his rules, inside this barrier.)

Kamijou thought that as he tried to move around Himegami to cover her—for him, there was no option to sacrifice her and run.

However...

"I am tranquil. Without impediment, *I head there now*."

Before Kamijou could take a single step, Aureolus *had already closed the distance of thirty meters* to cut between Kamijou and Himegami.

"Wha...!?"

Any understanding Kamijou might have had of the situation went out the window as he froze in the presence of Aureolus, now right in front of him. The alchemist didn't have quick feet. It was like he just cleaved space and appeared there all of a sudden.

It was as if Kamijou were watching a movie that skipped a frame.

"It is clear. I am sure many questions come to mind, but I have no duty to answer," the alchemist stated calmly. "The blood of Himegami is something very important to me. I have no intention of handing her over to you without resistance; therefore, I have come to pick it up."

The phrase “pick it up” somehow succeeded in reigniting Kamijou’s thought process.

“...Damn it! You bastard!”

He couldn’t stand down after coming this far. For now, he would tear the mastermind, Aureolus, away from the captive, Himegami. Thus, he ran forward. There was less than two meters separating them in the first place.

However...

“*You shall not—*” declared the alchemist in an unhurried voice, “*—come any nearer to me.*”

In that instant, a dramatic change occurred.

An onlooker wouldn’t have seen any alteration. *But that lack of change was the bizarre part.* Kamijou had been running at full speed trying to join the two meters...but he wasn’t getting anywhere. It was like he was chasing the sun setting on the horizon—run as he might, the distance never shrank.

He was under the illusion that Aureolus and Himegami were sliding away from him in a hallway that went on forever.

He panicked. He considered the Imagine Breaker in his right hand. It had the ability to erase any abnormal power, even the systems of God, but...

(Then...what the hell am I supposed to punch!?)

“It is unavoidable,” Aureolus said without emotion. “What about me do you claim would cause her regret?”

A chill ran down Kamijou’s back and he stopped moving. He couldn’t get close. While he understood that, his body had apparently judged it dangerous to even try to get any closer.

Aureolus stared intently at Kamijou’s expression with eyes devoid of feeling, like he was staring at an insect on a specimen table and was stabbing one pin after another into it.

Suddenly, Aureolus brought a single, hair-thin needle out of an inner pocket of his white suit. Kamijou’s nose detected the faint scent of disinfectant. He put the needle he had picked against his neck, then casually stabbed it in. The motion was like he had flipped a switch for hypnotic suggestion.

Everything about that movement screamed “execution order.” Kamijou flinched and tried to leap back.

However, Aureolus flung the needle he had stabbed into his neck to the side, and said, “It is unsatisfying. Boy—how boring you are.”

Kamijou, still trying to back away, immediately found himself unable to open any more distance between him and Aureolus, no matter how much he withdrew. He was shocked at this queer reality. It wasn’t displaying a millimeter of change, whether he advanced or retreated.

So unable to do anything about the enemy in front of him, he felt like his heart would burst out of sheer nervousness. Aureolus stuck out his right hand without a word, stopping just before Kamijou’s chest—as if to grab something...as if to gouge out his heart.

And the alchemist sternly—

“*Blow*—”

“—Wait.”

—*tried* to declare something, but Himegami suddenly squeezed between them and her voice interrupted him.

Kamijou was speechless. Himegami was standing between him and the true alchemist with such overwhelming power, without any preparation, positioning herself as Kamijou’s shield.

(You...moron...! Don’t be doing that!)

Kamijou desperately tried to push Himegami out of the way, but he couldn’t draw even a millimeter closer to her. His entire body trembled with a sense of danger, like a clueless child walking up to a robber with a handgun...

But just then, he remembered what people referred to Himegami Aisa as.

Deep Blood.

Vampires could making Stiyl start shaking in his boots, and in turn, the power of Deep Blood could crush those vampires in one blow. In this situation, her presence was the trump card—the kind that can overturn a game’s balance with a single shot.

(Is there a chance to win...? If not, then she wouldn’t be doing something crazy like this.)

However, Aureolus looked at Kamijou with an expression of boredom.

He didn’t even spare a glance toward the trump card, Deep Blood.

“It is clear. You may embrace a meager ray of hope, but Deep Blood is not my enemy.” There was no sentiment in his voice. “It is natural. Why does Himegami Aisa possess the name Deep Blood? And ability so strong it can kill a vampire—ah, yes, I see. While true, if she had a power to that extent, the nickname Deep Blood wouldn’t fit, no? If that were the case, I believe a name like Overkiller would not be accurate.”

(...Don’t tell me.)

The panic trying to steal Kamijou’s last hope rapidly closed in around his thoughts.

“It is inescapable. Deep Blood, whose blood lives to reject, is a power used only against vampires. It is not a variety of superhuman strength; its identity is nothing more than her blood. It lures with a fragrant aroma—a red color, one that will return to ash any and all who drink of it. Terrifying is its brutal level of seduction. But he shall still die, for he must drink. It is obvious, however. It brings no harm to humans. Only the descendants of Cain revert to ashes when bathed in the light of the sun.”

Aureolus said all this while taking another needle out of his pocket and stabbing it into the back of his neck. Kamijou couldn’t tell what sort of effect it had on him, but a glint of uplift appeared in the alchemist’s emotionless eyes.

“Hah. You planned to denounce me with that attack, but it changes nothing. At the very end, you cling to, rely on, and pray to Deep Blood, not Himegami Aisa. How is that different from me?”

Those words stabbed deeply and mercilessly into Kamijou.

With those words, he ruined the spirit of someone who kept trying to struggle, even though knowing that it was pointless.

However...

“That isn’t true. This person did not even know what Deep Blood meant. He also didn’t know what vampires really were. This person only came here because he simply wanted to save another person he had just met today. We haven’t even exchanged introductions. He just couldn’t leave me here.”

The one pleading with him was not Kamijou but Himegami.

She spread her arms wide as if to become a shield to block him from Aureolus’s words.

“Aureolus Izzard. What is your goal?”

The alchemist’s eyebrow moved ever so slightly at Himegami’s words.

“He is neither a magician nor an alchemist. You got an ordinary person involved. Is your goal to punish him unjustly and satisfy yourself with his death?”

“...”

“If something that petty is your goal, then I’ll take my leave. I know that I can’t hope to beat you. But even I have the option of biting my tongue to end my own life.”

“...”

“I don’t want to kill any more vampires. You are necessary for my goal. If you say I cannot have your assistance, then I have no more reason to live. Now, then, what will you do? Can you keep on living without my assistance?”

Himegami’s eyes never wavered.

Her straightforward, equal stare almost made *her* look like the master of this castle.

Aureolus took yet another needle out of his pocket and thrust it into the back of his neck.

“It is obvious. I have no time to spare in a place like this,” the alchemist answered without interest. “I have things I must deal with. I suspect I should focus on dealing with Index rather than this intruder. It would be easy just to crush her, but to be frank, I cannot get used to how to treat *that thing* no matter how much time goes by.”

Aureolus’s mutterings were casual, but Kamijou’s breath caught in his throat.

(...Wait. ...Index? Could this guy have—!?)

Kamijou tried to grasp at Aureolus in a desperate attempt to overturn the situation. But he didn’t come even a hair’s width closer. The alchemist’s hand, which he had lowered before, turned to point at him again.

Himegami took a step toward Aureolus as if to challenge him, but the alchemist continued without feeling.

“Fear not. *I shall not kill him*.” He removed the needle from his neck. “*Boy, everything that has happened here—*”

(Damn it, this is no joke! I can’t retire here now! Not like this!)

But the alchemist smiled faintly, as if he was reading his mind.

“*—Forget it all.*”

Part 3

It was now night around him.

“?”

Kamijou rose from his seat and took a look around. When he glanced about, he realized he was inside a school bus. He looked at the route map, but it wasn’t going anywhere close to his dormitory. He followed the line back to the name of the previous stop. The words “District 7 — Misawa Cram School Front” were written there.

In general, the last trains and buses in Academy City were all aligned with the curfew, 6:30PM. It was out of the ordinary for a bus to be running at night like this. Maybe it was a private bus the prep school had arranged.

“Misawa Cram School?”

Kamijou tilted his head. Was that the name of the cram school? Kamijou pondered, but couldn’t get the answer. He’d never be commuting to a prep school in the first place. He was Kamijou Touma—he wasn’t even “suited” for the summer holiday homework, much less studying for exams.

For a moment, the term “memory loss” popped up in the back of his mind, giving him a chill. He thought at first that it was just that his memories of the past had disappeared, but maybe he was in a more serious situation.

“...I’m going to the hospital,” he told himself, deciding to get off the bus whose destination was still unknown. He’d see where getting off at the closest stop took him, but he still didn’t recognize any of the neighborhood.

His sense of balance was fine, and he wasn’t bothered by any weird urges to go to sleep. He seemed to be healthy at a glance, but having a gaping hole in his memories of the last few hours meant that he should definitely go to the hospital and get a proper checkup.

(Which means I’ll need my insurance card, I’ll need to go back to the dorm first...No, wait, is the hospital still receiving patients this late? Well, this is an emergency, oh, but how will I explain to Index? She will definitely think something’s up if she knew I suddenly went to a hospital, besides that, she’s probably pissed that she didn’t get dinner...)

His head a jumbled mess, Kamijou decided to go back to the student dorms for now. The buses going through this station wouldn’t pass by the dorms.

(Such misfortune.)

Just as Kamijou was thinking that...

...It felt like something had called him...in the direction of Misawa Cram School

"?"

Kamijou tilted his head, looking puzzled.

(That's weird. I feel like I'm forgetting something important.)

It was a sense of irreversible danger, like he'd left to go on a vacation but forgot to shut off the gas. The back of his head felt like it was steadily burning up. He didn't know why, as he mulled over the faraway Misawa Cram School *he couldn't see yet*.

"Well, I guess if I can't remember, it's just not worth remembering," he said noncommittally, resuming his walk.

He hadn't eaten in a while, but he couldn't very well avenge himself for the food. At the moment, he needed to find a way to soothe Index's nerves.

(Probably one of those Kuromitsu House puddings that are seven hundred yen a piece will do. Damn, why did I buy that stupid 3,600 yen reference book?)

Kamijou sighed and scratched his head with his hand.

...With his right hand, which could cancel out all supernatural abilities, even the systems of God.

With a sound like his skull was being split, the events of the day came storming into his mind.

"...!"

Kamijou frantically turned around to look.

Night had already fallen on the city. Maybe it was because he was one bus stop away, but he couldn't even see Misawa Cram School from here. How many hours had passed since then? Stiyl was nowhere to be found. Himegami wasn't here, either, nor was Aureolus. And—neither was Index.

"—Forget it all." With just those words, Aureolus had *actually made him forget everything until just now*. He forgot about Misawa Cram School, which was now a battlefield; about Himegami, who had been kidnapped by Aureolus; and...him saying something about obtaining Index.

"Shit!"

He didn't know what had happened in those few hours. Stiyl was still in the school all by himself—was he okay? With all those thoughts bouncing around in his head, he ran toward it.

Highly confused and sprinting at full speed, he didn't catch on at first. To the fact that he wasn't running into anyone, despite dashing as fast as he could...to the fact that there wasn't anyone to hamper his path in the first place...*and to the anomaly that, even though it was nighttime, Academy City's shopping district was empty*.

(...What's going on?)

By the time Kamijou finally realized how strange that way, he was already in sight of the Misawa Cram School buildings, towering into the night sky.

He was downtown, but the space was devoid of human presence. He recognized this particular out-of-place feeling. It was the same sensation he had gotten when Stiyl brought out the Opila barrier this afternoon.

But this time, it wasn't that *nobody* was here.

In a far stranger twist, there was a handful of people standing, encircling the school.

(...What?)

Kamijou stopped and turned back. There was someone standing a little ways off from him. He didn't even know if they were male or female; they were attired completely in silver armor, right from the top of their head down to their toenails.

No passersby were in the area. That made the bizarreness stand out even more. From his viewpoint there were three of these armors, and if they were actually trying to surround the four buildings, there would be many more than these.

(...What is this? Those people are wearing some strange outfits...Are they from the Church?)

He figured that he'd try and talk to one of the people in armor first. The situation may have changed in some way while he bumbled around without any memories.

"Hey, what's going on? Are you people friends of the Church?"

He suddenly remembered the knight who had passed away near the elevators.

One of the corpse-like suits of armor gave a start at the word "church." "—I am Vittorio Cassera, the Lancelot of the Thirteen Knights of the Roman Catholic Church." If anything, he seemed troubled. "Hmph. You're that civilian who left the war zone by coincidence. We've already seen you leaving that fortress. You sure do have some good luck. If you don't want to die, then evacuate at once."

Kamijou wondered what nonsense that person was spouting as he observed the full suit of armor very carefully.

“We said that we do not wish to cause unnecessary deaths. We have judged that there is no need to broaden the casualties without purpose, even if we were to conduct a prayer bombing using the Gregorian Chant.”

Kamijou was stunned.

The Gregorian Chant was the thing being used inside Misawa Cram School, being performed by using a huge number of students. According to Stiyl, *it had originated in the Roman Catholic Church*.

“—It was originally the ultimate weapon of the Roman Catholic Church. They’d assemble 3,333 monks into a temple and gather their prayers for one huge spell. It would cause the magic power to skyrocket, just like focusing sunlight through a magnifying glass.”

Stiyl’s words came back to life in the back of his mind. If a replica had that much power, then just how much destructive power did the original contain?

“Bombing...That’s insane! How powerful would that be!? You’d get swept away just for being in there!? You can’t be planning to blow away the entire building!”

“That’s exactly what we will do. Our divine art has been prepared in the Vatican Church, the greatest hallowed ground in the world, using the prayer of 3,333 people. It can revert any zone on the planet precisely into ash. Leaving that apostate’s tower be would surely affect our dignity.”

“That’s...nuts. Wait, there’s a ton of unrelated students in there! Stiyl and Himegami, they might still be in there, too, and even Aureolus—”

—Aureolus had just wanted to summon a vampire so that he could save someone.

“And if you just blow up that humongous building, where do you think the debris is gonna fly!? Rubble will fly out like cannonballs in a six-hundred-meter radius!”

“A righteous end justifies the means. Consider the blood to be shed the cornerstone for the future.”

Those words nearly pushed Kamijou over the edge.

What he said one moment before and what he said one moment after were completely different. They told Kamijou, a civilian, to flee left he be caught up in it, and yet here they were, not giving a damn about the people inside. It was too inconsistent.

“You’re insane! One of your own comrades is inside that building.”

“...Percival has been martyred in a foreign land and has let his own blood flow to become the rock upon which tomorrow will be built.”

Kamijou thought back to the dead knight near the elevators.

The words of this fully armored person trembled and were filled with madness. He had lost all ability to think rationally.

“Damn it, wait! Then just give me time. One hour—no, thirty minutes will do!”

“I will not listen to your words! Begin the attack!!”

The knight calling himself Lancelot raised the long sword at his side toward the heavens. It glowed pale red, and almost seemed like an antenna.

The armored man swung down the “antenna” before Kamijou could leap at him.

“A reading from the Revelation of John, chapter eight, verse seven—”

As if to signal something.

“—Recreate the sound of the first angel sounding his trumpet here!”

He didn’t know if it was an effect of the magic, but like a howl, the glistening sword sounded a trumpet-like noise throughout the night sky...

All of a sudden, every sound disappeared.

The thinly sliced clouds floating along in the night sky appeared to be completely blown apart.

To others, it would have probably looked like a giant bolt of lightning. A huge pillar of light, coming from the heavens down onto the world below. But the bolt was red like blood. Hundreds, if not thousands of bundled red arrows of fire all fused together to form a single, enormous lance, and in one fell swoop, it stabbed into one of Misawa Cram Schools four buildings.

The holy spear of crimson struck through from the roof of the building to its basement in the blink of an eye.

Just like stepping on an empty soda can, the building was squashed down to half its original height nearly instantly. Its glass all shattered, and interior objects came hurling out of the windows.

The detonation didn't stop. Only one building had taken the hit, but it was connected to the buildings next to it by the bridges joining them, forcing them to collapse. The last building remained standing like some sort of tombstone.

Kamijou was dumbstruck at the lunacy.

People fell out every time fissures ran through the crushed walls of the building, like a beachgoer shaking the sand out of his trunks. It didn't end there. Tons of debris were raining down like meteors, even destroying some of the neighboring structures. The only saving grace was that no one was around due to the people clearing field.

"Damn it, this is nuts..."

Kamijou clenched his teeth. Stiyl was in there. Himegami was in there, and lots of other students and teachers, and Aureolus, too—and even Index might have been in there.

"You goddamned lunatic!!"

Kamijou sprang into a dash. Not toward the person in armor—there was no time to waste on something like that. He charged straight at the site of the bombing.

A sandstorm of fine particles assailed him as if to obstruct his way. He couldn't see in front of him. He mustn't open his eyes. But he still ran, thinking that the reality he was presented with was some kind of joke.

But suddenly, a change occurred.

"?"

The first thing Kamijou felt was the building particles blocking his vision being pulled back. The storm of particulate matter began to flow forward as if whipped up by a gale—right toward the demolished school.

"!?"

No—it wasn't only the particles. The fragments flung all over floated into the air, and collapsed walls rose up. The connecting pieces fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle, and their damage began to close up as if being fixed up with a spatula and clay.

It was like he was watching a video rewinding. The fallen building lifted itself up. The people who had been tossed out and had fallen began being sucked back into the fissures, and the damage to the building started to repair as well. The next thing he knew, like nothing had happened, Misawa Cram School's four buildings were standing there again. Even the buildings nearby that were destroyed by the blown-away cannonball debris were back. It was enough to make him think that even the contents of his memories had been altered.

(Hold on. Rewound... That means!?)

Kamijou looked up into the dark sky, and at that moment, a crimson holy lance fired out of the school's roof as if drilling through the heavens. It was obvious where it had gone. As the rest, it *rewound* back to the caster.

"A-ah..."

He promptly looked to his side and saw the owner of the dumbfounded voice, the fully armored man. He was sitting on the ground, his legs having given out. Was it because he knew all too well the power of the real Gregorian Chant?

Kamijou looked up at the night sky. Even the seven Level 5s in Academy City couldn't pull off a nonsensical miracle like that.

(That's...the enemy)

Aureolus Izzard.

(That's...his true strength.)

How was he supposed to fight somebody that ridiculous? Kamijou was speechless.

"Damn it!"

Kamijou ran toward Misawa Cram School for now, as if trying to shake off the fear.

When he arrived at the automatic glass doors, he froze, stunned.

What he saw on the other side of the pane of thin glass was normal, and he couldn't sense a single trace of destruction.

With dread, he passed through the door and reentered the battlefield.

Inside the school, it was the same as always, but the very fact that nothing had changed almost made Kamijou's hair stand on end. That wasn't all. The students within were unharmed and were taking classes like usual. It was like everything, including having been wounded by the Gregorian replica and melted into puddles by Limen Magna, had been undone.

As he ran past one of the classrooms, something caught his eye and he stopped.

(That's...!)

A single female student was sitting near the back of the wide classroom. He knew her. She had braids and glasses—she was the one who had shielded Himegami and was melted by Aureolus Dummy's Limen Magna.

There she was.

Copying down notes from the blackboard, rubbing her sleepy eyes, leaning on her hand.

There she was.

Living in a totally normal world, as if nothing had ever happened.

"...!"

The scene was incredibly peaceful, but it instead filled Kamijou with horror. If involved with Aureolus's magic, everything would be reset this easily—life and death, fortune and misfortune, ordinary and extraordinary.

But for now, he still ran through the building, He wanted to make sure everyone was safe as soon as he could.

He didn't know where he ran or how far.

He finally found a familiar face when he dashed out into a straight hallway on one of the floors.

"What's up? You look pretty rattled."

It was the voice of Stiyl Magnus, who had abandoned him, then used him as bait, but with a carefree grin on his face. Kamijou should have hated him, but at the moment, it reassured him more than anything else.

"Hmm. If you're here, that means—this is definitely Japan, then? I mean, there were Asians everywhere so I thought so, but what's going on? This strange barrier construction...I remember the scent of this magic, but..."

Stiyl went on rambling to himself, disregarding Kamijou in front of him. It seemed like his memories had been erased, too, just like Kamijou's. Wait, not exactly like them. He didn't know why he was in Misawa Cram School, which meant Stiyl's memories had to have been erased going much further back than his.

He only needed to touch Stiyl's head with his right hand to restore his memory. But when he thought that, he suddenly got worried. Wouldn't the very fact that he was "brought back to life" from that bombing attack before be erased, too?

When Aureolus told him not to come closer, his right hand didn't work at all. However, with a life on the line, he couldn't take any chances.

"Hey, which of these buildings have you been in until now?"

“What?”

“Just tell me!

“??? The north building, pretty sure. Why?”

Kamijou breathed a sigh of relief. The north building. Three of the four buildings had collapsed, but the north building continued to stand there awkwardly. Stiyl hadn’t been revived or anything in the first place.

Now that he knew that, things were simple.

“Hey, Stiyl, I’m gonna teach you a special prayer that will get rid of all your troubles.”

“...I think Kanzaki is the one that specializes in eastern spells, but sure.”

“Just listen. It’s simple, just shut your eyes and stick out your tongue.”

“???”

Though genuinely suspicious, Stiyl did as he was told.

And then, Kamijou declared, “Congratulations☆ This is to commemorate you using me as a decoy and running away, you jerk!!”

“...Huh?”

Right after that, Kamijou let go a right uppercut to Stiyl’s chin, knocking it upward.

Stiyl Magnus simultaneously regained his memories, bit his tongue, and tumbled down to the floor.

Part 4

Aureolus Izzard stood for a while on the top floor of the north building.

The uppermost story was a giant space using the entirety of the level, called the principal’s office. Perhaps due to the place being a prep school, though, its impression was closer to a president’s office than a principal’s.

Aureolus wasn’t directing his gaze to its extravagant interior.

He was staring out the window with his back turned to the glittering room, but he still wasn’t looking at the nightscape spread out beneath him, either.

He was peering at his own face reflected in the glass.

(...How unforeseen, that they should have walked here from such a distant place.)

He contemplated as he stared at his visage, which wouldn't even twitch an eyebrow at seeing buildings lift themselves up like living creatures from his one statement—really only two words: "Go back."

He wasn't like this in the past.

He was the sort who had trouble expressing his feelings, but he thought he was once a human who was able to express everything from joy to anger, from grief to delight.

The skin on his face didn't move an inch, and the light in his eyes didn't waver a millimeter; it wasn't out of serenity or composure, but simply because he didn't have the flexibility to create expressions.

(It's alright even if it became like that.)

Achieving his own mission meant all the world would be engulfed in an unremitting war, and that his emotions would be whittled away. He understood that.

Aureolus Izzard just wanted to save one girl.

Behind him there was a large desk made of ebony, and on it was a girl who had been placed into a sleep.

Index Librorum Prohibitorum.

It had been three years since meeting the girl, who hadn't even been granted the minimum requirement to be human: a name.

At that time, Aureolus Izzard was a Cancellarius of the Roman Catholic Church.

As one who penned grimoires yet still belonged to the Church, he was an exception among exceptions. He would reveal the evil ways of the witches around at the time, find methods to deal with them, put them into words, and make them into books—all the while believing his works would protect the innocent from the witches' threat.

The grimoires recorded by Aureolus had actually saved a great many people.

However, the Roman Catholic Church made them into their very own trump cards. They did not tell anyone unrelated to Roman Catholicism, nor did they inform even other people of Christianity, like the Anglican Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. They implicitly declared that if they desired salvation from the witches' threat, then they should convert.

As a result, many fell to the hands of the witches even though the alchemist had led them to solutions.

It was unreasonable, like not being able to give a sick person even the simplest of surgeries and watching him die.

Aureolus found it unforgivable. He had faith that the trump cards he devised would save everyone.

It wasn't long before he made the decision to bring one of the books he authored outside the confines of the Church.

It was England, which had enough harm caused by witches that it was called the land of magic. With the utmost care, he wrapped himself in two or three layers of camouflage and succeeded in secretly establishing contact with people of the Anglican Church.

There he discovered hell—in the form of a girl who could never be saved.

He knew it at first sight. It only took one glance for the alchemist who wished to save the entire world to understand that he would never be able to rescue this girl, even if he rescued all else.

The one girl carried 103,000 grimoires taken from around the world. Just one of those evil, wicked volumes could drive a normal person mad, and she carried as many as the stars in the sky—and even though she was aware she would never know salvation, she still smiled like a young girl.

In reality, the girl really couldn't be saved. A human is not fundamentally strong enough to carry 103,000 grimoires. The girl's body was violated by their poisonous knowledge, and her mind was trespassed by their poisonous insight.

It was so bad that her memories needed to be wiped annually to flush that venom.

That's where the alchemist witnessed the end of his ideal.

She could still smile for others' sake, despite all that misfortune being forced up her by others.

The alchemist began to write grimoires in order to rescue just this one girl, continuing to trust that his books would save all the world, without exception. Whenever he finished writing one, he would go over to the Anglican Church. And even if ten or twenty of them ended in failure, Aureolus never gave up, he still continued to write them.

At some point after he had forgotten how many grimoires he had completed, Aureolus took a moment to think about why his will never broke and why he continued to write them.

Doing that caused him to finally realize something.

From the moment he first saw her, he had considered her to be beyond salvation. Providing grimoires was but a front as to why he never gave up—the truth was that *he only wanted to see her*.

It was really an ordinary story.

The alchemist's wish was to save her, and instead, she had saved him.

Once he knew that, the end was near. Aureolus got to the point where he could no longer hold a pen. Now that he realized he couldn't even rescue one person, both his mission and his confidence were completely shattered.

She can't be saved, she can't be saved—*no one can be saved with these methods.*

If he still desired this girl's salvation, his only path was to fall from grace.

He had but one reason for his fall.

If God had the power to save the entire world, then why couldn't the girl in front of him be saved?

With that, Aureolus Izzard made an enemy out of the Roman Catholic Church, Christianity, and indeed of the whole world. Even then, she couldn't be saved. He dabbled in the Zurich school of alchemy, a type of Hermeticism, and even then, she could never be saved. He came to believe by fully decoding the human body, he could heal any sickness. He had believed that if he fully explored the human mind, he could heal any soul. Even then, she absolutely couldn't be saved.

She was alone. Neither faith nor technology could save her any longer.

And that was why he thought...

Just why would it be wrong to rely on the power of the descendants of Cain, who have strayed from the path of man?

He would betray anyone for his purpose. He would use anything. He would even subdue Deep Blood with his own two hands.

That was how the alchemist wandered from the straight and narrow. What was left behind was the tragic wreckage of a man who wished for the salvation of others above his own.

"..."

However, there was one thing Aureolus Izzard did not realize.

The person silently looking at his back—the girl named Deep Blood—was *also* here because she wanted to help someone.

Salvation was distant.

There were still no signs of the coming of a messiah.

♦

"Aureolus reflected the Roman Catholic Church's *real* Gregorian Chant...? That's impossible!"

Having finished chasing Kamijou around with a flame sword in hand, Stiyl was dumbfounded by what Kamijou told him.

"No, I'm serious. The busted buildings all got fixed like it was some kind of videotape rewinding," answered Kamijou, running down the hall.

Stiyl seemed to have been able to probe more deeply into this place than Kamijou. Apparently, after locating Aureolus's headquarters, his memory was erased, and he'd been wandering around the building ever since.

"...That would mean...But that's impossible for current alchemy...," muttered Stiyl, annoyed, giving a puff of cigarette smoke.

"He said stuff like 'don't come closer' and 'forget it,' too. What, is that some kind of crazy stuff all over the place in the magic world or something?"

"...Of course not. Magic is an academic field—a world grounded firmly in theories and rules. If something that rule-breaking existed, the whole thing would be ridiculous, and no one would bother studying magic."

"Then what the heck was that? He's *actually* saying one word and the world changes into the way he wants it."

"The way he wants it...Hmm. I don't like the sound of that. It reminds me of Ars Magna."

Kamijou briefly frowned at his odd reaction to the words "the way he wants it," but then he remembered.

The power to warp the world into whatever you want—*it was the ultimate objective of alchemy, and no one has yet accomplished it.* Didn't Stiyl explain that to him before?

"Wait. Then doesn't that mean he mastered alchemy!?"

“That doesn’t make sense!” Stiyl shot back with unusual roughness. “I explained before that this Ars Magna isn’t a technique that humans can carry out. Even though the incantation itself is complete, just one or two hundred years wouldn’t be enough to recite it, even without sleep or breaks. There’s no excess that can be eliminated to shorten the thing, and if you tried passing down the work from parent to child to grandchild, the ceremony itself would be messed up like a game of telephone. Therefore, a human with a finite life span cannot use that magic!”

If Kamijou had studied magic, Stiyl’s argument probably would have sounded pretty sensible.

But the magician’s voice was trembling—almost like he had witnessed something unbelievable.

“...Oh, I guess so.” Kamijou tried looking at it from a different angle. “If he can change the world to the way he wants it, then it’s kind of weird that we’re alive in the first place, huh? If he just thought ‘die’, that would be it. He wouldn’t have to use the Gregorian replica or a body double or anything.”

He wouldn’t need vampires or Deep Blood in the first place. If he needed them, he could just make them himself. And if he could change the world into whatever he wanted anyway, he could cut out the vampires entirely and just grant his wish through his own power.

“But jeez, what’s that guy trying to do, anyway? He wants to rescue someone or something, but then he just casually kills other people, and all of a sudden Index gets caught up in this...I wonder if all the unexpected stress from this incident is making him lose his mind.”

“What, that girl is?”

“He just mentioned something along those lines. I haven’t actually seen her. Maybe he was just going crazy and seeing things,” Kamijou replied lightly to reassure him—and to reassure himself.

However, Stiyl’s face fell even further than when they were discussing the alchemist. He spat out his cigarette like it tasted bad.

“Damn, I see. I get it now. If you’re away from civilization for three years studying magic, anyone would be out of touch with the world.” As he held a new cigarette in his mouth, he finished, “I figured out what he wants. It’s Index.”

“What...?”

Kamijou didn’t get it. Index shouldn’t have been involved in this incident from the beginning.

“Listen up, Kamijou Touma. Index used to need her memories erased once a year. In other words, her human relations would all be totally reset annually, and a new partner would be at her side each time. That’s the kind of situation it caused.”

“So... what about that?”

“This year it was you, two years ago it was me—” said Stiyl, truly exasperated, “—and three years ago, the name of her partner was Aureolus Izzard. I believe he acted as her teacher.

Kamijou was speechless.

“All her partners in the past ran into the same dead end. They all struggled desperately to put an end to her memory problems, and they always failed,” Stiyl growled. “Of course, he would have arrived at the same dead end...I see. So even when the results came in, he didn’t accept them.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

“It’s simple. We, her past partners, haven’t been rejected by Index or anything. *She just doesn’t remember*. So it’s easy. If you could somehow heal Index’s mind and have her remember, *she’d turn back to look at us again*.”

Kamijou’s heart felt like it had been struck with a nail.

He didn’t know why the shock hit him. It would be great if Index’s brain was cured, right? He didn’t understand, and this hazy jolt didn’t seem to want to go away.

He remembered her smile.

He didn’t think it would be this shocking to consider it being directed toward someone else.

“...But besides, that kind of thing is completely unacceptable,” Stiyl said quietly to himself. “If it’s wrong to erase someone’s memories, then it’s equally infernal to tamper with their memories. Is he really so far gone that he can’t understand that?”

His voice was low, so Kamijou looked at his face to try and hear.

But he gave a puff of cigarette smoke and shook his head, bored.

“It’s nothing. I was just saying *that it’s absolutely impossible for him to save her*.”

“Why?”

Kamijou wasn't sure what he meant. If the man could fix buildings, steal memories, and even rewind people's lives, was *anything* impossible for him?

"The reason is simple. You're the one who brought it all to nothing."

"?"

"You saved her, didn't you? *You can't save someone who has already been saved*. That's all there is to it. No hidden meanings here."

"Oh," said Kamijou, finally figuring it out.

Aureolus Izzard was Index's partner from three years ago. It had been three years since he lost her; without any communications with the outside world, he would have no information.

In other words, Aureolus was—

"We're here. How polite; the door is open for us."

Stiyl looked ahead.

The giant door to the principal's office, the entire top floor of Misawa Cram School's north building, was ajar, as if to welcome them in.

Part 5

It was a wide-open space.

This was the room in which the branch school principal and the founder of the scientific religion once sat. The room sparkled in beauty, but it had no class—fitting for such warped ambitions. A sense of revulsion was the only thing that stood out, as if they had wandered into a restaurant concerned with etiquette alone, ignorant of the proper way to wait on customers.

Himegami made a surprised face when she saw Kamijou enter into the room. On the contrary, Aureolus showed no emotion whatsoever. Something natural had naturally happened. That was all his expression said.

The air around them was terribly hollow. It was as empty as a timeworn, faded photograph.

That void likely reflected the alchemist's own soul.

As a man who could manipulate the entire world, there probably wasn't anything he couldn't obtain.

But because of that, there was nothing certain for that man.

A skilled puppeteer—an esper with the Marionette ability—would never think that just because everyone around them was smiling, that it was out of happiness. A puppeteer can create those very smiles with a single fingertip. Even when presented with the brightest of laughs, they could only think of it as what they could do just by moving a finger.

He was the same.

For someone who could create anything, he would never find meaning in what he created.

The mood here was not the kind that hangs over the field of a decisive battle.

This place in which Aureolus Izzard stood would change into an empty and hollow war zone—that was all.

"Hmph. From your eyes, I can see that you comprehend my objective," the alchemist started in a bored tone. "Then why, I ask, must you try and stop me? Your own objective, for which you engrave runes—is that itself not for the sake of defending and rescuing Index?"

Aureolus glanced down.

In front of the alchemist, atop a garish desk, laid a silver-haired girl, put to sleep quietly.

Kamijou automatically tried to run toward her, but Stiyl's long arm cut in from the side and prevented him from doing so.

"It's pretty simple. That girl can't be saved with those methods. She's too important to give to a surgery we know will fail, got it?"

"Nay, I say. Your reasons are born from envy. It is natural. You cannot be satisfied, for you and I are kindred spirits who have lost their dreams and despaired, and yet I have outwitted you. I shall not call this *worthless*, because the fundamental truth of my own delusions is one and the same."

Stiyl knitted his eyebrows a bit.

Aureolus Izzard had said that smoothly, with no hint of sarcasm.

“Until this point, due to the all-too-extensive volume of information in Index’s brain, she required her every memory to be erased each year. This is an unbreakable rule, and a fate the likes of man cannot hope to oppose,” Aureolus declared sternly. “However, this only means that one must make use of that which is not man. Now that I have arrived at this conclusion, it is instead a mystery—why has there not been a single soul to propose the use of vampires until now?”

“...”

“Vampires are that which have eternal life. That which continue to store memories, like humans, ad infinitum. However, never have I heard of such a vampire whose brain ruptured from too much information,” the alchemist said. “The vampires—they have it. *They have a technique to never losing themselves regardless of the quantity of information they collect*.”

“Hmm, I see. So your plot is to interact with vampires and have them teach you that method, then?” Stiyl wiggled the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. “A question, if you will. If that method turned out to be impossible to use on another human body, what would you do?”

“Obvious. If impossible for the body of a human—then one must only remove Index’s body from humanity,” Aureolus answered without skipping a beat.

In other words, he meant—

“*You’d get her bitten*. Tsk. I doubt there’s a believer in the world who’d rejoice at being made into a plaything for one of the descendants of Cain. I’m gonna tell you something I have to tell all her other past partners as well—if you want to save someone, it’s vital that you remove yourself from the picture and learn what that person is feeling. Well, that’s something I *only learned recently*, too.”

“...Worthless. That is truly hypocrisy. This child said at the very end that she did not ever want to forget. She said she did not ever want to forget the memories in her heart, even if it should violate the scriptures, and even if she should die for it. She said this while her body was incapable of turning a finger, without even noticing the tears flowing from her eyes—and smiling all the while.”

Aureolus Izzard looked somehow to be holding in his temper.

What was he remembering? What was he looking back on? Kamijou was in no position to know.

“So that won’t change your thoughts no matter what, eh. Well then, allow me to use my trump card. It’s a bit cruel, though.” Suddenly, Stiyl looked in Kamijou’s direction. “Go on, tell him, *current partner*. Tell this wreckage in front of us what his fatal flaw is.

"...What?"

Aureolus looked at Kamijou for the first time.

What part of that line had touched a nerve? He couldn't tell, but spoke anyway.

"*Just what time period are you talking about, anyway?*"

"Wh...at..." This time, Aureolus Izzard stared at Kamijou intently.

"That's how it is. Index was already saved—not by you, but by her current partner. This guy managed to achieve what you couldn't." Stiyl grinned in honest cruelty. "About a week ago, was it? Ah, well, I guess you wouldn't have heard. After all, you weren't at her side for three years. Of course you wouldn't have gotten the message that she had actually already been saved."

"Impossible..."

"Yeah, I can understand why you can't believe it. I watched it happen directly myself, and I still don't. Or maybe I just don't want to? Since I've basically been confronted with the fact that *she will never look back and see me again.*"

"Impossible, infeasible! There is absolutely no method to save Index! Pray tell, what do you claim a human could do when he is neither a magician nor an alchemist!?"

"The specifics are tied to the good name of Necessarius—or rather, the Anglican Church itself—so I'll stay silent on that, but let's see." Stiyl exhaled smoke with spite. "His right hand is called Imagine Breaker. Putting it simply, he's the owner of a power that is more than he deserves."

The alchemist was shocked.

The alchemist looked at Kamijou with an expression that made his serenity until now seem like it was a pipe dream.

"...Hold. That means..."

"Yes, good work. You've been hiding underground for three years since betraying the Roman Catholic Church, but it was all a wasted effort. Well, I get your pain at your hard work not being rewarded, but don't worry! Right now, *just like you wished for, she seems very happy with her partner, you know?*"

"—Ha..."

That sentence was all it took.

Aureolus Izzard began to laugh madly, as if everything supporting him had been destroyed.

“Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha hahahahhahahahahaha!!”

...That person had completely lost it.

Kamijou thought about that, blankly but definitely. But he was wrong. To his broken clock-like eyes, light returned. In front of the alchemist, atop the large desk, something had started to move. The lone, sleeping girl Index had reacted to Aureolus’s insane mirth and awoke in a haze.

The last pieces of Aureolus’s final stronghold broke, and it began to sink.

Index opened her eyes slightly and, with the delicacy of raveling a thin strand of thread, queried:

“...Touma?”

Her eyes, however, did not look at Aureolus Izzard, who was so close to her.

She didn’t know where she was, how long she’d been there, who had done this, or how she’d been brought here. She hadn’t even checked her own body, and she ignored the unease at thinking of what could have happened while she was passed out.

But she smiled. Her eyes narrowed as if she was very pleased.

Just because Kamijou Touma was in her sight.

“Ah...”

Kamijou inadvertently backed away.

Index’s manner made him quite happy. She looked at him and him alone, rather than the rest of the world. The action felt irreplaceable, like a kitten who had just opened its eyes.

But at the same time, it was very sharp and cold.

Behind Index, the alchemist who was supposed to be the leading man got completely forgotten by the girl he had protected. His face was as stiff as though he just saw the end of the world.

Kamijou really couldn’t face that reality.

Behind Index was the alchemist, who would have certainly been the protagonist once upon a time. He had been completely forgotten by the girl he needed to protect, and he was frozen with a face like he was watching the end of the world.

Kamijou couldn't look directly at that reality.

Aureolus Izzard—once the hero. He betrayed the Roman Catholic Church, abandoned his faith to become an alchemist, and yet he still exhausted all his might trying to save just this one girl.

And yet a bad end awaited him.

If Kamijou Touma had made one mistake, this ending could have come to him as well.

She was a pure and saintly heroine, loved by everyone in the world...

But because she was the heroine, her kindness couldn't be for anyone other than the world's one protagonist.

That was all, and yet it was everything—those cool, realistic eyes of purity bared their fangs here.

"—I should be perfect. Why do you have such composure? Am I at fault for something?"

Suddenly, Kamijou remembered the body double he had defeated.

That was not some shoddy, poorly made copy. In fact, it was a mirror image of Aureolus Izzard's very essence.

"Ugh—"

Aureolus Izzard couldn't say anything.

He just smiled...with his face frozen in distortion and his breath escaping a little at a time like he had hiccups.

He raised his arm above Index's head.

His stance was akin to a guillotine blade about to fall. Index, despite that, didn't take her eyes from Kamijou. That seared through the alchemist's mind excessively. He gathered strength into his uplifted arm.

"Index...!!"

Kamijou instantly tried to run to her. He was so panicked he didn't know which foot to put in front of the other. The alchemist grinned like a madman. He looked at Kamijou, who indeed seemed like the protagonist.

He reached out with his right hand. But it was too far. He wouldn't make it. With force, the alchemist...

...didn't bring down his arm.

Kamijou stopped and watched in spite of himself.

"Ugh—"

Aureolus quaked, his arm still positioned above Index's head like the blade of a guillotine.

"Uuh...uuuuuurrrrrgggghhhh!!"

Yet he still couldn't move.

He had lost everything he had and even attacked former companions, all to try and save this one girl. A complete stranger had already saved her, and to make things worse, she didn't even grant one look at the man who had abandoned everything for her sake.

If it were Kamijou in that situation, would he be able to retain his faith in Index?

Could he stop himself from feeling like he had been betrayed?

Nevertheless, Aureolus Izzard still couldn't bring himself to harm Index.

To that alchemist, she was that important to him.

"..."

Kamijou couldn't move.

He had no memories. He'd heard from others that he had apparently rescued Index, but he didn't know how he did it or what feelings he'd had at the time.

He'd still saved someone without knowing and had won her trust completely unaware.

With this man before him, he thought again: Just where was his *right* to monopolize her trust.

Aureolus set his glare upon him, even granting him the illusory sound of a sword being drawn.

That man could kill people with but one word. He knew that his glare was one of death, but somewhere in his heart, Kamijou was completely convinced. Aureolus's furor had by no means been quelled. He was a raving madman with nowhere to go now that he couldn't aim the angry outburst he wanted to let out at Index.

Then where exactly would he point the tip of his blade first?

It was incredibly obvious when he thought about it. He knew that this much would be completely natural.

"*—Grovel, intruders!*"

A roar exploded from him.

Suddenly, Kamijou felt like dozens of invisible hands were holding him down, forcing him to kneel like a bank robber whose gun had been stolen. The word "intruders" probably included Stiyl, too—out of the corner of his eye, he could see the red-haired magician also being beaten into the floor.

"Guh... gah...!"

Kamijou struggled for his life, fighting back the urge to vomit that came from the feeling of all his organs being pushed on. Little by little, he slowly brought his right arm toward his chest; it felt like it was bound by a strong electromagnetic force. One millimeter at a time.

(For now I just need to touch my body with my right hand! If I do that, then I might be able to get back my freedom of movement, just like when I got my memories back.)

"Ha, haha, hahahaha! *I shall not kill you that easily. Allow me to take my time and enjoy this! I have no intention of laying hands on Index, but if I do not take this out on you, I will lose myself!*"

The alchemist removed a slender acupuncture needle from an inside pocket. Then, with trembling hands, he pressed it to the back of his neck and thrust it in. It was as if he were pressing a button in his body.

He threw the needle aside like he was batting away an insect biting his skin.

That was the trigger for the start of his attack. Aureolus glared at Kamijou and...

"Wait."

At that moment, Himegami Aisa stood between them.

It was the exact same position she had taken once before, when she shielded Kamijou. But the situation was distinctly different. Aureolus had clung *not to Himegami Aisa, but to Deep Blood*. Now that his goal, Index, was no longer attainable, he didn't need to pay any attention to a mere means to and end...!

"Hime—"

And yet, Kamijou couldn't say it.

He could feel it from looking at her back. She was seriously worried—about Kamijou, of course, but also about Aureolus, who was steadily falling to pieces. Wordlessly, she was telling him that she somehow needed to set things right again before this came to an end they couldn't take back.

He couldn't possibly tell her a cold truth like that to her back.

"*You are in my way, wench*—"

But that in itself was his failure.

Kamijou looked at Aureolus's eyes; they made him think of gun barrels. Those eyes were serious. He moved his right hand in urgency. No, he *tried* to. If he didn't stop this, then Aureolus would definitely get Himegami involved. Little by little, inch by inch, he forced his right hand to come up off the floor and pulled it to his face. He touched his index finger of his ultimate right hand to his tooth and bit down on it.

It sounded like all his bones had broken, with it returned his body's freedom. This was his chance. Kamijou got up. Now he had to push Himegami out of the way and make Aureol—

"—Die."

In that moment, his words made time stop.

Stabbed to death. Strangled to death. Poisoned to death. Shot to death, sliced to death, bashed to death, publicly executed, crucified, incinerated, suffocated, crushed, run over, frozen, drowned, bombed. He compared it to every single way of killing he knew, and yet it didn't give him any insight as to the cause of Himegami's death.

There were no wounds. There was no blood loss. There clearly wasn't sickness.

She just died.

It was just like her batteries had run out. If such a thing as a soul really existed, it was like it had been removed from her body, leaving an empty shell.

She didn't even scream.

Her body swayed heavily. It leaned backward, faceup—as if to show Kamijou her face—and she started to fall. Slowly. Slowly. Himegami's face began to come into sight.

Himegami's face was wrinkled and twisted into a smile.

One that seemed about to burst into tears even now, yet never showing a single drop. It wasn't from sudden surprise or shock. That smile said that she was prepared for this, but she wasn't able to change the outcome.

Himegami Aisa understood from the start that standing before Aureolus would bring this about.

But she had still clung to one last hope, smaller even than a ray, and tried to stop him.

No one had wanted her, and she was treated like an object until the very end.

In the same way the alchemist wasn't able to become the hero, the death of Deep Blood, Himegami Aisa, was decided simply, as if removing a piece of humanoid scenery.

There was no way...he could just watch this silently.

(Don't you...)

With the alchemist no longer in his sights, Kamijou darted toward the falling Himegami Aisa without a second thought. He didn't have a reason. It just felt like if she hit the floor, that magical death would come into reality and never again be changed.

"—Don't you fucking give me that!"

Somehow, he was able to grab her body with both hands just before she crumpled to the ground. Her body was extremely light...like something very important had fallen out of it.

In his arms was the girl's body, strangely soft.

But though weak, a pulse could definitely be felt...*through the right hand he caught her with.*

"Wha...*has your right hand annulled my Ars Magna?*" The alchemist's eyes froze. "Impossible. *I have surely decided the death of Himegami Aisa. Does that right hand incorporate some heavenly mysteries!?*"

"..."

Kamijou didn't reply.

(Whatever. I don't care about your stupid logic. Just like when you got your stolen memories back by pure coincidence, *you only canceled my order to "die" with that right hand*. I don't care about any of that stuff at all.)

Kamijou couldn't forgive this man.

He pitied him. He even sympathized with him. When he saw him unable to harm his precious Index after she had left him behind, he had even nearly lost sight of the reason he had to clench his fists.

But it was different now.

Even if he was betrayed by the most important person to him before his eyes. Even if he witnessed the moment the most important person to him was stolen. Even if he was tortured with rage, with nowhere to go, unable to even blame himself.

She was someone who had thought of him as truly important...

...and he had pushed his rage onto her to satisfy himself. Kamijou could never condone the way his brain was wired.

Kamijou didn't understand a thing about the pre-memory loss Kamijou Touma.

What memories did he have, what past had he journeyed through, and what feelings did he have as he pursued the future? What did he like, what did he hate, what on earth did he protect, and what in creation did he want to keep on protecting?

However, there was one thing he could say for sure.

Kamijou Touma could never accept this alchemist—no, this human.

That was how *the two disjointed Kamijou Toumas* came together at last, after coming all this way.

"All right, Aureolus Izzard. If you think you can do anything you want—"

Kamijou Touma slowly lowered Himegami Aisa from his arms to the floor. Then he stood back up. He was silent, and yet he did not hide his anger, which was so great that it could have given you a static shock if you touched him.

"—then let me destroy that screwed up illusion of yours!"

He made this declaration in the voice of Kamijou Touma, the Imagine Breaker.

Between the Lines 2

(—That's why I wanted to be a magic-user.)

This story is from ten years ago. One day, one evening, a mountain village in Kyoto was attacked by vampires. It was completely sudden and unheralded, abrupt and illogical.

Though peaceful enough that even a police station would have been unnecessary, the small village was transformed into hell in a single night. The young ones who took up the mantle of fighting back against the vampires were buried one after another, and the remaining villagers gathered in one building. Those who attempted to escape from the village, unable to endure the terror, never returned. At the end, it was impossible to know *who was a human and who was a vampire*. The situation degraded into a quandary of promised companions killing one another.

Before dawn broke, the villagers were only divided into two categories: corpses and vampires.

(Then how come I survived by myself? Who am I?)

The girl thought in her young heart. Vampires were surrounding her. They were the familiar older men and women she had just said good-bye to this evening.

The vegetable grocer who said, "It's dark now, so you should go home quickly," came to bite the back of her neck.

—The moment he bit her, the vampire returned to ash.

Yuzuka, the girl who said, "Let's play again tomorrow," came to bite the back of her neck.

—The moment she bit her, the vampire returned to ash.

Her mother, who pushed her out of the way and said, "Run away quickly," came to bite the back of her neck.

—The moment she bit her, the vampire returned to ash.

Soon, everyone began to notice it. If a vampire bit the girl's neck, they would be extinguished, as if it was some counterattack. The girl's wishes had naught to do with it. Vampires would melt away and disappear just by taking her blood into their mouth, as if it had become sulfuric acid.

In spite of that, no one stopped biting her.

One by one, the villagers turned to ash, lost their physical forms, and were blown away by the wind. The girl watched it silently.

Because of course she couldn't say it.

Because all the vampires kept saying:

"I'm sorry."

Every vampire said that to her.

One said he didn't want to become a monster, and another cried that she didn't want to turn someone else into the same monster as her. They went on having faith that they had but one salvation: to return to ash.

The vampires returned to ash.

Saying, "I'm sorry." Saying, "I'm sorry for making you carry this sin all by yourself." Crying until the end. Unable to smile until the very end, without being saved until their very last moments.

When she noticed, the village was covered in a blizzard of ash.

The village was at peace. No one was around, so it was at peace. Even the culprits, the vampires who had wandered into the village, were no more. She didn't know when she had actually been bitten, but they apparently turned to ashes at some point.

The girl understood something.

Even the vampires who had attacked the village were victims. The vampires were probably very scared of the girl who had the power to kill them in one fell swoop, she thought. They trembled day after day, and they couldn't take it anymore, and they decided they needed to kill her at all costs, and yet they didn't have the power to do so.

After worries piled upon worries, they tried to assemble their forces by turning the entire village into vampires...

...But even that plan was easily annihilated by her power.

♦

(That's why I wanted to be a magic-user.)

To rescue those who couldn't be rescued and protect those who had been abandoned. The kind of magic-user from storybooks, without rules and removed from common sense, who was able to save both victims and criminals, and even drag the souls of those already dead back from the pit of hell.

At all costs. No matter what anyone said. She thought this for a long time: that she wanted to become a magic-user. This was all she wanted, and when she met the alchemist, the dream that she knew couldn't be granted suddenly seemed to be just down the road, and she was bewildered. She was so nervous that day that she couldn't sleep. It was an uncomfortable nervousness.

And now, in front of her, was the one alchemist.

"*You are in my way, wench*—" said the dream she strived for, the corners of his mouth twisting with malice.

"*—Die.*"

She didn't know what she thought at that moment. Her consciousness didn't last. While she didn't know what she was thinking, her consciousness fell, slumping into a deep darkness.

But right before that...

"—Don't fucking give me that!"

She could swear she heard a boy cry out.

Neither magician nor alchemist, the boy shouldn't have been any more than human.

The boy was really angry.

But it *wasn't at* what the alchemist did. It was because she was going to die.

His figure somehow appeared blindingly radiant.

For some reason, she got the feeling that he was looking at her dream, which she could never hope to reach.

CHAPTER 4

The Sevens of Murder.

Deadly_Sins.

Part 1

In this space, lifeless but certainly vast, stood two people.

"..."

Kamijou didn't spare a glance at Himegami, breathing shallowly at his feet. He *couldn't* spare it. He didn't have that kind of time. She had risked death and used everything she had to try and stop someone. If he cared about her for even a second, there was a man in front of him he had to stop as soon as he could.

Ten meters separated them.

Against a man who could distort the world to his bidding with a single word, it was a hopeless distance.

"..."

Therefore, without a word, without a signal...

The esper and alchemist quickly began their battle, each to defeat the other.

"—Sh!"

Kamijou exhaled slightly and tried to burst into a sprint toward Aureolus. Aureolus did nothing about it. All he did was take a single acupuncture needle out of his clothes pocket and insert it into his neck.

There were ten meters between them. If he put his back into it, he could close that in four strides—

"—Suffocate."

But after Kamijou took the first step, he suddenly lost all momentum.

It felt like a steel cable wrapped around his neck, and he flinched and bent over at the pain. He grabbed his neck with his right hand like a person suffering from imbibed poison might.

The memories lost to Aureolus had been revived like that, and Himegami, ordered to die, avoided death like this.

However, his breathing didn't return to normal.

He wasn't able to take a breath; it was like instant glue had hardened in the back of his throat.

(Calm down...Calm down!)

As Kamijou gasped for breath, he dislodged the fingers of his right hand from his throat.

(What was it he said? Bind my neck with a rope? ...*No*. It was more vague, more simple. He was just saying *my breath should stop* and I should die, wasn't he!?)

So he took his fingers from his throat and forced them all the way into his mouth. Like someone trying to throw up something they just ate. His fingertip touched the back of his throat; as the urge to vomit jolted through him, he heard the sound of glass breaking, and his breath returned.

That all happened in a mere five seconds.

But Aureolus, who could use one word as a weapon, still had time to play around in those five seconds.

Disinterestedly, Aureolus threw away the slender, hairlike needle he had stuck into his neck and announced:

"*Electrocute him*."

An instant later, Kamijou found himself surrounded by pale blue electric lights from all directions.

Before the muscles on his spine could freeze in terror, the vortex of sparks burned through the air and scrambled toward him.

(...!?)

He immediately thrust out his right hand, though it wasn't a calculated move.

However, like a lightning rod, the electricity gathered only to his outstretched fingers. The sparks that touched his hand recoiled back like a snake at deadly poison, but they began to quietly disappear.

(I can dispel it...)

Kamijou's heartbeat, though, quickened from excitement more than nervousness.

In contrast, the alchemist narrowed his eyes slightly. He took another hairlike needle and jabbed it into the back of his neck.

"Strangle him. In addition, crush him to death."

Dozens of ropes flew at him from the floor, creating waves in it like the ocean surface. At the same moment they wrapped themselves firmly around Kamijou's neck, and abandoned car fell from the ceiling, also creating waves.

(I can dispel it...!)

But with a simple swing of his right hand, the ropes ripped apart like strips of wet paper, and the lump of steel descending on him crumbled like a sugar cub and disappeared into the void.

Aureolus threw the needle aside as if a poisonous bug had crawled on his neck.

(I can dispel it. I can do this. I can avoid his attacks. If he gives orders with a word, that also means he can only throw one attack at me at a time. If I keep a cool head and deal with them, he's nothing to be afraid of!)

Though Aureolus's means of attack involved giving commands using words, it also meant that Kamijou could predict the attacks as he heard those words. It was the same concept as taking cards quickly in karuta. If he said, "electrocute him", he could guess just from the four letters "elec" what kind of attack was coming.

It only gave him a split second.

However, having a second to spare during fistfights didn't happen in the first place. In boxing, punches can fly at you every 0.3 seconds. Though the force of each and every one of Aureolus's blows was tremendous, the speed of his attacks wasn't much different from human fists.

Understanding it would let him extinguish his fear of the unknown. The gist was that this was the same as punching it out with delinquents pulling out-of-place knives on him, despite it being a children's tussle.

Aureolus scowled a bit, possibly having caught on to the composure in Kamijou's expression.

"I see. The true explanation—your right hand must erase all, including my Ars Magna."

Kamijou had a slight doubt at the alchemist, whose own composure didn't crumble.

"Then it means this. *Is it impossible to erase an attack that cannot be touched by your right hand?*"

This time, he thought Aureolus's words would freeze him alive.

"A gun in my hand. Load out: magic bullets. Usage: firing. Quantity: One is more than enough."

The alchemist gleefully stuck a thin needle into the back of his neck.

He lightly threw his hand to the side, and instantly, it was gripping a sword.

At a glance, it looked like a rapier, fit to be held by princes in children's books, but it wasn't.

It was a disguised gun—there was a flintlock, like the kind pirates would have used a long time ago, buried in the sword's guard.

(Something is coming!)

Kamijou's body automatically overflowed with tension...

"*Begin firing at a speed exceeding that of human kinetic vision.*"

Aureolus's rapier flashed up, slicing the air in front of him—as soon as Kamijou saw it happen, the sound of gunpowder exploding resounded through the room. A moment later, something lightly scraped his cheek, and then a magic bullet shining with pale white light collided with the wall, scattering a roar of sparks.

"...!"

It was simple. He pulled the trigger built into the sword. That was it. But Kamijou couldn't be expected to intercept a magic bullet sailing at his eyes. He froze, his right hand still in place. It made him tense up more compared to an esper ability or magic, because he could easily imagine the destructive force of a bullet.

It was of a completely different speed from the Limen Magna the body double had used.

It had nothing to do with magic or esper powers. Those magic bullets were impossible for a human to avoid or defend against. They spelled certain death.

Aureolus, looking satisfied, tossed aside the needle stuck in his neck.

"*Mass-produce previous action. Prepare rapid firing via ten disguised guns.*"

As soon as the words left his lips, a total of ten sword guns appeared in Aureolus's hands, five each, spread out like steel fans.

If those guns were fired, Kamijou Touma would definitely be unable to avoid or block them.

(Got to... run!)

Therefore, Kamijou would try to evade before they were fired. He was about to attempt a roll to the side...

...But he suddenly thought of something.

Behind him were Himegami, right at his feet and barely able to breathe, and Stiyl, collapsed by the wall and unable to move.

"Idiot! What are you stop—"

Stiyl's stunned shout, and...

"*Preparations complete. All ten disguised guns begin firing simultaneously.*"

...Aureolus's voice and the ten blue-shining magic bullets making direct hits on Kamijou's entire body all happened at the same time.

The ten impacts hit everywhere on Kamijou like iron fists.

To say that they "flew at him" wouldn't do them justice. He couldn't feel this crazy, invisible, high-speed assault any more than he could a video that dropped a frame.

"U... argh...!"

His only saving grace was that the magic bullets didn't have enough power to kill him. He was blown backward being pummeled with slow, old-fashioned shells, and he left a trail of blood in his wake. Like a bouncing gumball, he tumbled onto the floor until he hit something and stopped. When he looked, he saw it was Stiyl's body. It seemed he had been sent almost seven meters back.

He thought his flesh had torn and his bones had broken, but it was only intense pain. It seemed like he could still move everything fine.

He didn't think he was lucky. The alchemist had said, *"I shall not kill you so easily."*

Aureolus appeared gratified by this result and pointed the palm of his hand toward Kamijou again.

"...Tsk. What is that? As far as I can tell from the earlier memory manipulation, and this sequence of attacks, it certainly looks just like you're altering reality to your whims with a few words."

But Stiyl spoke first, as if to block Aureolus from doing so.

The alchemist diverted his attention to Stiyl, lying prone on the floor.

"Ha. Ars Magna is nothing more than the pinnacle of alchemy. It seems to me that it is only sensible that though attaining it is unimaginably difficult, it is the end goal, so one will naturally arrive there if one continues to walk down the path."

"That's absurd. Even if Ars Magna is theoretically complete, the incantation is too long—one or two hundred years wouldn't be enough to finish it. You can't shorten the spell any more, either, and even if you split the work up by passing it down from parent to child to grandchild, the ceremony would be distorted like a game of telephone...!"

Stiyl shot a brief glance toward Kamijou as he said that.

Kamijou nodded. He understood. If Aureolus was performing these attacks with a few of his words, then it would be safe if he diverted his attention and made him think less about attacking them.

While Stiyl drew Aureolus's attention, he was implicitly saying:

Find a way to beat him somehow with what little time I'm buying.

"It seems like it's something difficult to realize." Aureolus didn't realize it. "Ha. One cannot complete the ceremony in the span of one hundred or two hundred years—*yes, if one should do so alone.* Dividing the work by passing it down through the generations will warp the ceremony like a game of telephone—this is correct, *but it is not necessary to pass it down to one child.*"

"...What?"

Stiyl furrowed his brow, and Index talked in a scornful voice.

“It’s the Gregorian Chant. If you directly control two thousand people and have them chant the spell, the pace of work is multiplied by two thousand...Even if it was a ceremony that took four hundred years, you could get it done in just seventy days!”

An operation done not in series, but in parallel.

Kamijou looked at Index. He thought that what she was saying was knowledge from the 103,000 grimoires in her head...but that wasn’t it. No one had ever completed Ars Magna in the first place, so there wouldn’t be a book in which his solution would be written. She put it all together in her head by combining the knowledge she already had.

“In reality, I was intending to multiply the effects by clashing spell with spell. I accelerated it by only an additional one hundred and twenty times; this cannot be called a success.”

Kamijou scraped together the tattered pieces of his awareness and looked around.

His body could move. The distance to Aureolus was only seventeen meters—not all that far. If he could somehow dodge the alchemist’s onslaught, he should be able to aggress on him immediately.

“One hundred and twenty times...You did it in just half a day!?”

He got the feeling that the act had been wiped out of Stiyl’s words.

“But this is a gathering of espers. If you use something like the Gregorian Chant, their bodies would be destroyed, because of their different brain circuits!”

Kamijou looked around once again. There was nothing that looked suitable for a weapon. He groped around in his pocket, and although it wasn’t a weapon, he felt something cold and hard.

Two attacks.

If he could block or avoid Aureolus’s words twice, he might be able to somehow get in close enough.

“Yes, but why do you not realize it?” The corners of Aureolus’s mouth turned up. “*If something is broken, one need only fix it, correct?* In the same way I fixed those destroyed buildings.”

Kamijou immediately ground to a halt and looked at Aureolus.

The alchemist continued, without much interest.

“Ah, I have not told you yet, have I? *Those students—today was certainly not their first time dying.*”

“Y-you...”

A scathing-hot whiteness formed in Kamijou’s thoughts.

“Correct. I am not so foolish as to be ignorant of my own sins...Yes, that’s right. I failed myself. I continued to believe in the certain existence of somebody I wanted to save despite. Though I would not possibly have imagined it coming to this!”

He flung the needle away as if he were scraping poison out of his body.

“Bastard!!”

But before Aureolus could weave his words, Kamijou stood.

He grabbed the hard thing in his pocket.

Like it was natural, Aureolus began to say something that would crush the now-standing Kamijou, but before he could, Kamijou took the cell phone out of his pocket and hurled it at Aureolus with all his strength.

“...Hm?”

Aureolus was perplexed for a moment—and by then, Kamijou had already launched into a sprint.

He didn’t think he could finish off the alchemist with a mere cell phone. All he needed to do was create a tiny opening for him to get up close. As expected, Aureolus’s attention switched to the cell phone.

“*...Stop the projectile. Fall to the ground, meaningless thrown stone.*”

In that slight loss of time, Kamijou had already closed the distance to half. Just one more attack. If he could somehow block Aureolus’s strike, he’d be able to switch to the offensive—!

“*The disguised guns in my hand again. Usage: firing. Execute preparations on my mark.*”

But, *on the other hand, he inevitably needed to get past one more attack to reach him*.

Aureolus disposed of the guns fitted in the ten swords in his hands. As the empty hidden guns hit the floor, the alchemist’s hands were gripping trick guns again, like having used that sound as a signal.

Kamijou's face tightened in tension, and at the moment Aureolus tried to announce his decisive words...

"Innocentius!"

Stiyl's roar stopped Aureolus.

Kamijou looked at Stiyl, stunned. Impossible. He couldn't use that nuisance without hanging up rune-engraved cards around the room. Besides, Innocentius was staking out the student dorms in order to protect Index, wasn't it?

It was a bluff.

A completely meaningless bluff that was meant to extend Kamijou's life, if only by a moment.

The light of Aureolus's gun barrel-like eyes turned to Stiyl.

"*Float into the air, ye priest of London,*" muttered Aureolus, like he was setting him up for execution. In response, Stiyl floated up near the ceiling as if there were no gravity. Kamijou stopped moving in spite of himself. If he used Imagine Breaker, he could rescind Aureolus's order, but the magician was clearly too far away.

"You fool! *You can't possibly defeat Aureolus as you are now! His weakness is those needles! You should know about that medical scie—*"

Stiyl shouted with all his might to thaw the frozen Kamijou...

...And Aureolus, glaring daggers at Stiyl, commanded:

"*Explode from the inside, ye runic magician.*"

The sound that was made almost sounded comical.

Just as he had declared, Stiyl's body inflated like a balloon for a moment. Immediately afterward, his body burst out vehemently from within. A jumbled mass of blood, flesh, bones, organs, and muscles splattered all over the nearby surroundings.

Parts of his flesh and blood instantly reached the ceiling, then spread out from there in a dome shape. It covered the vast room like a planetarium—it was a work of art from the magician's very blood and flesh.

"...!"

And the terrifying part was that his blood vessels *were connected*. His organs *hadn't been destroyed*. It was almost like a train map. The red fluid his bared heart was pumping passed through his outstretched arteries, reached the organs that were dotted about, and returned back to his heart.

He still wasn't dead.

Despite being in that state, Stiyl Magnus was very much alive.

In pieces.

The magician's possessions, cards with runes engraved on them, whipped up like a blizzard of sakura petals.

The groggy Index fainted atop the desk at the sight of such extremes.

"...Damn...it."

Kamijou frantically worked his thoughts, which were on the verge of being paralyzed by the horrific situation. He used everything he had to kill the shriek rising in his throat. Stiyl hadn't asked for help, even at the very end. The thing he wanted to tell Kamijou, even knowing things would turn out this way...He couldn't possibly put that out of his mind.

"—You fool! You can't possibly defeat Aureolus as you are now! His weakness is those needles! You should know about that medical scie—"

He recalled Stiyl's words.

(His needles... Medical science?)

Now that he mentioned it, Aureolus had been hurriedly moving his hands around as if searching for something for a few moments now. The acupuncture needles he had kept stabbing, over and over, into the back of his neck...Was Stiyl talking about those?

Academy City, which used drugs as part of the esper development program, had vast pharmaceutical and medicinal knowledge that couldn't be compared to the outside world. Kamijou's knowledge of acupuncture came to him like it was an English vocabulary word on a pop quiz.

Leaving qigong and eastern mysteries aside, in terms of *medical science*, acupuncture was basically a way to directly stimulate one's nerves. The stuff could relieve pain or control the functions of organs by triggering excitation. Back before they had anesthesia, it was valued pretty highly as an almost-magical way of blocking pain.

(...But what about it?)

Kamijou mentally tilted his head in confusion. As one might guess from the fact that needles aren't used in modern surgery, the reality was that acupuncture couldn't actually bring about such dramatic effects in somebody's body. It wasn't like narcotics, which could release "limiters" on your physical body or thoughts, either. The most it could do was directly stimulate your nerves, so it couldn't do anything more than spur the release of endorphins, put them into an excited state, and ease anxiety, so—

(—Anxiety?)

"Change contents. Suspend firing of disguised guns. Prepare for elimination of intruder using the blades."

Kamijou had forgotten to keep running and was blankly staring at Stiyl's end, but he looked back to Aureolus as those words. The trick guns, which should have been staring death at him, spun around and around in the alchemist's hands.

Despite that, he couldn't escape the one question that came to mind. Now that he had one question, many, many others appeared and dragged him down into them.

(Yeah. Something is strange.)

It happened with both Himegami and Stiyl. They were killed with simple words, like die and explode. If he could make everything and anything go his way, why did he need vampires or Deep Blood? If he could make anything exactly how he wanted, *why didn't he create a vampire with his own hands?*

(Yeah, something's definitely weird about this—!)

No, if Aureolus Izzard could *really* make anything and everything the way he wanted...

Then why the hell didn't Index turn back to look at Aureolus even one time?

The ultimate Ars Magna, which distorted reality in accordance with Aureolus's words.

That wasn't how it worked.

What if it was a magic that *haphazardly* distorted reality into whatever Aureolus thought?

"Wa...it. Is that it...?"

Stiyl had said that it wouldn't be hard for Kamijou to beat Aureolus.

Aureolus knew Stiyl, Index and Himegami. Because he was familiar with them, he knew for certain that even with their full power, they would never be able to fight on par with him.

But Kamijou was the sole exception. He had only met Kamijou today—he was a totally unknown quantity.

"—Wha...has your right hand annulled my Ars Magna? Impossible. I have surely decided the death of Himegami Aisa. Does that right hand incorporate some heavenly mysteries!?"

Aureolus was certainly nervous at the time.

And if everything was aligning with his own thoughts, then that very anxiety was...

"So...That's it..." murmured Kamijou in blank amazement. It was nothing. Now that he had figured out the trick, it was simple.

However...

"Hm. *The source of your excessive confidence...It was that right hand, correct?"*

As he looked at Kamijou, Aureolus pushed the needle he removed from his inside pocket into his neck and looked at him casually.

"Then first, I will sever that right arm. Disguised guns, rotate your blades and fire."

There was no sound at all.

The moment Aureolus waved his right hand, the afterimages of the trick swords were all over Kamijou, spinning like the blades on a fan at incredible speeds. He had his hands full just barely dealing with *them*.

It was impossible to describe it as "something" had "flown at him."

One moment, the trick swords were in the alchemist's hands...

And the next, they had severed Kamijou Touma's right arm and hit the wall behind him.

Like a hot knife through a stick of butter, Kamijou's right arm was cleanly sliced from his shoulder.

His right arm danced and turned in the air.

There was no pain. There was no heat. Kamijou stared dumbfounded—just stared dumbfounded at his detached right arm.

(—He cut off...my arm?)

He watched his arm fly through the air...

(—He can do whatever he wants, he could have just crushed my heart with one word.)

His face was not distorting with pain or terror, and he only had a single question...

(—But he decided to cut off my right arm first?)

He compiled all those questions and formed an idea...

(—Even though he should be able to do whatever he wants.)

Fresh blood spewed out of where he had been cut, and as if he was remembering something...

(—Because he couldn't do anything about *this power in this right hand*.)

He still couldn't feel pain. He still didn't feel hot.

(—*He couldn't take away my Imagine Breaker if he didn't do something like cut off my entire arm along with it?*)

His arm spun and dropped to the floor, creating a dull sound of flesh being hit.

In that moment, his idea, born from his doubts, resolved itself into certainty.

Now that he knew what he had to do, the rest was simple.

Kamijou seemed to hear a switch being flipped in his mind.

Part 2

"Hahahah

At that moment, Aureolus involuntarily took a step back at the unforeseen event.

He had cut off the boy's right arm, and yet he was laughing.

He thought for a moment that he had gone mad from intense pain and fear, but no. This was no more than normal laughter, made in sureness of victory.

But what was truly strange was the fact that he could stay normal in this extreme situation at all.

(What...is that?)

The first thing Aureolus felt was not fear but discomfort.

(I know not what that boy is thinking, but this duel was over long ago. Therefore, any further discomfort is unnecessary. I shall kill him quickly.)

With a ting of irritation, he tossed the needle in his neck aside.

"Disguised gun, to my hands. Load out: magic bullets. Quantity: One is more than enough."

He waved his right hand. In reply, a rapier with a flintlock gun hidden inside materialized out of thin air. Satisfied with his own perfect technique, he continued to give orders.

"Usage: crushing. In accordance with the original objective of a single bullet, fire and crush my prey's skull."

Aureolus pulled the trigger. The gunpowder propelled the magic bullet out, aiming for the still-laughing boy's eyes.

Though it was a low-velocity projectile, it would still pierce the brain if it hit the eyeball.

No human could dodge that speed, nor could one block that force.

The boy wouldn't be able to do anything. The inside of his head would simply splatter like a tomato.

That's what should have happened.

"What...?"

Aureolus couldn't believe his eyes. The boy didn't do anything. He thought he had fired the blue magic bullet accurately, but somehow, somewhere, it went wrong, passed by the boy's face, and struck the wall behind him.

(Did I miscalculate the distance? No...)

He declared the order once again.

"*Copy previous action. Usage: blind fire. Ten disguised guns firing at once.*"

Aureolus pulled ten of the camouflaged guns out of nothing, and bullets flew from their barrels that looked like a bouquet of flowers.

However...

Of the ten bullets that should have hit him precisely, not one of them could even deliver a glancing blow to the boy.

(A misfire!? Impossible...!)

Aureolus watched in disbelief—watched the boy who had twice avoided certain death.

An unbelievably large amount of fresh blood was spurting out of the open wound in the boy's shoulder. The spray was showering his face in blood as well, his face was being painted with blotches of red.

And yet the boy was still laughing.

He laughed as if the darkness in his body had all ejected from the gaping hole left by his severed arm.

The boy wasn't doing anything but laugh.

Aureolus started to give a third execution order to the *enemy* before him, but then he wondered.

(However, can Ars Magna even *be* dodged not once, but twice by pure coincidence, without some trick?)

The alchemist halted, startled at his misgivings.

He knew the power of his technique the best. It wasn't the gentle sort that could be dodged by sheer luck.

(*Wait...is her doing something? Do I only not realize it!?*)

The boy, laughing in earnest jubilation, stuck out a tongue to lick his lips as if they were covered with sauce.

Not even a fallen vampire would do that. It was like he was reveling in the taste of his own blood.

(What...is this!?)

That was the reason Aureolus couldn't help but feel unease in his heart.

(What is that? He can still fight? With that body? Without his right arm? Impossible. The possibility of that is nonexistent. He is already at the point where he would die of blood loss if I left him here. It is fine. There is no problem. There cannot be a problem. There shouldn't be a problem—!)

Yes—the very moment that he felt that unease...

The boy should have been drained of all his strength after losing his arm, but he muttered something heroically anyway. His face was grinning. He was looking at the alchemist and grinning.

"Kh...agh. You damned knave...*There is no escape from my Ars Magna. Innumerable decapitation blades into position. Sever his head from his body immediately!*"

With those words, many giant guillotine blades came out of the ceiling above the boy's head as if they were cutting through the surface of water. Each one was a blade of execution weighing one hundred kilograms. The hands of gravity pulled them down, but Kamijou simply continued to smile, without attempting to avoid them or defend himself against them.

(It is fine. He cannot dodge that. It will make a direct hit without doubt. If it makes a direct hit, then it will naturally finish him. That was my order. I definitely ordered that. I ordered it, I ordered it, I ordered that! Therefore, there is no problem. There is no issue, and thus no need for concern!)

Aureolus repeated it many times in his mind. He repeated it again and again. If things proceeded how he thought, in the way he though, then that boy would die. He should die. He couldn't possibly *not* die...but the more he thought about it, the more his misgivings inflated. It was like those misgivings were saying that all of his words were like prayers meant to suppress the great unease sleeping deep in his soul.

In reality, and just as he thought, the many guillotine blades made direct contact with Kamijou's neck.

He had gotten him for sure this time.

But *all the guillotines shattered to pieces like sugar cubes just from touching him*.

The boy was laughing.

He was looking at the distressed alchemist—mercifully, cynically, pitifully, disdainfully, pleasurably, as if mocking him for fun.

The boy was laughing...

...With an expression that stated he'd already completely seen through to the weakness in his attack.

(Damn...him. By what means...!?)

He no longer needed to hold back. Aureolus pierced Kamijou with a sharp, stabbing look.

"Simply die, bo—"

—But before his roar stopped, the whispers of his heart wormed their way into his mind like noise.

(But will just that one word actually kill him?)

He fumbled with his quaking hand to bring out an acupuncture needle, but the many needles fell to the floor in a mess.

But the alchemist couldn't pay this any mind.

As if stricken with horror, Aureolus Izzard looked at Kamijou. At some point, the sharp look in his eyes had been chipped into a rusty blade. Even though he wasn't thinking it, his legs strangely started to step back. The sole of his shoe stepped on something and crushed it. He had broken all the needles on the floor.

Ars Magna distorted reality in accordance with his thoughts.

However, if Aureolus was to think that his trick wouldn't work or that he couldn't win at the same time as his command, then *even that would become reality*. *It was a double-edged sword*.

That was the reason he did not create a vampires or Deep Blood "in the way he thought." It was simple—somewhere in his brain he had thought that he couldn't create that, and thus he was unable to.

Aureolus's words were analogous to bullets.

Various ideas would get mixed into one's thought processes. He couldn't give resolute orders with something like that. It would even run the risk of self-destruction. Therefore, he stabilized his mental image into a bullet and fired it by delivering words from his mouth. It worked under the same principle as reciting English vocabulary words aloud to memorize them.

Aureolus had an emergency method prepared in case things came to this sort of situation, but...

(Damn it, my needles...Where are my acupuncture needles? Why did I drop them? It is so that I won't become like this, so I can kill my unease that I carry them around with me! *Without them, I am*—)

Aureolus gasped.

(Without them, what? Halt, stop, do not think any more than that. I must not think thoughts that shall lead me to whence I cannot recover—!)

The more he tried to avoid it, the deeper his thoughts fell into the hole. Aureolus was unable to stop thinking despite understanding that. Ceasing his thoughts would mean giving in. Like a snowman beginning to roll down a mountain, Aureolus's misgivings grew without limit and started to lose their purpose.

The boy in front of him didn't say anything.

Wordlessly, silently, he began to walk toward Aureolus.

This conversely plunged Aureolus into the depths of panic.

He could not stop that boy. He did not know how to stop him. Therefore, Aureolus could do nothing. He stood there like a scarecrow awaiting his visitation. There was no other alternative.

The next thing he knew, the boy was right in front of him.

How ironic this scene was, that he should stand to face him with the desk upon which Index was collapsed between the two of them.

And even despite all of that, the alchemist found himself unable to move, like a snake had glared at him.

(I see. Stiyl, Index, Himegami Aisa. Every one of them was familiar. Therefore, I knew their true power and understood beforehand the fact that they could not stand against my Ars Magna. However—what is this boy? This is our first meeting. If I do not know his real potential, then I also do not know whether my Ars Magna will—!)

"Hey."

His shoulders flinched at the boy's sudden voice, like Aureolus was a child being lectured to.

The boy spoke.

"You bastard. You weren't thinking that you could crush my Imagine Breaker just by cutting off my right arm, did you?"

He bared his teeth, his eyes with such a glint that they might have fired red light from them.

The boy spoke, sincerely delighted.

(Wha— Wait, don't think unease ba—)

Aureolus was able to pray, but he wasn't able to stop thinking.

In that instant...

That hole, left by Kamijou's missing right arm...Something strange happened to the flow of fresh blood erupting from it. Something unknown, something transparent, slowly began to show its form, like scattering blood on a glass sculpture.

Something leaped out of the hole in Kamijou's right shoulder then, and it was certainly not a human arm.

It was a jaw.

It was like nothing he'd ever seen before, save in legends, for it had a length of more than ten meters and a ferocious brutality. It was the gargantuan, gigantic jaw of a dragon king—also called Dragon Strike.

He should not have been able to see it, for it was transparent, but it was covered in blood. As if it were the boy's own arm, he slowly opened its mouth, lined with fangs like saws.

As if he was saying that this was the true form of the power packed into his right hand.

One of the fangs made contact with the air.

Nothing particularly large changed. However, something he couldn't see had definitely been altered. Though the alchemist's presence had been filling the room, it vanished, as if *his very initiative, the ownership of this area, had been modified.*

(Wha...)

Aureolus looked up in spite of himself to the distasteful planetarium of human flesh, created with Stiyl Magnus's skin and blood. The carnage spread about the room began to slither toward one point...as if his order had been canceled.

(It...can't be. He is coming back? The same as Himegami, who I already destroyed—!)

The moment he thought that, Stiyl dropped to the floor, not a scratch on him.

Icy fear stabbed into Aureolus's back.

Without a doubt, his own insecurity had revived the magician.

(Wait, this is no more than my unease, calm down, erase unease and I can erase this ridiculous thing—!!)

Desperately biting down on the terror about to claw out his heart, Aureolus attempted one last resistance. This scenario should have been no more than something created by Aureolus's own misgivings. So if he calmed himself down and got rid of this anxiety, the strange power in the boy should also disappear.

But the light of the transparent dragon king's shining eyes was brought to quietly glare at him.

That was all it took to give Aureolus the illusion that his vision was fading from terror alone.

(I can't...There's no way...)

Immediately after thinking that, the jaw of the dragon king opened as wide as possible and devoured the alchemist from the head down.

EPILOGUE

Deep Blood Encroaches.

Devil_or_God.

“I wonder about it every time, your body is strangely *fantastic*, isn’t it?” said the middle-aged doctor with the frog face in the completely white hospital room.

“...”

Kamijou couldn’t figure out how to respond, and his gaze fell to his own arm on the bed, tightened with a cast.

His right arm that had been cleanly and completely severed by Aureolus’s Ars Magna. The fact that it was an extremely clean cut was fortune in the midst of misfortune, though. There was no damage to the cells in that cross-section, so the medical staff had performed emergency procedures and stuck his arm back in. As it was stabilizing, the arm was connected completely after only a day.

He possessed knowledge of yakuza having their little fingers reattached after they got cut off, but he had never given a thought to whether you could do the same with much larger body tissue, like that of an arm. Well, if he *did* have that sort of unsavory knowledge, Kamijou would start to seriously begin doubting his past self.

“And to add to that, you’ve had two hospital visits within the last ten days. That will always cause rumors to sprout among the nurses, you know? Could it be that you’re into nurses?”

“...What are you talking about? I have no risky ideas about being played around with on the operating table or anything.”

“Is that so? That’s too bad. I thought I had finally run into someone with the same tastes, you know?”

Kamijou looked at the frog-faced doctor silently. All of his will to be in this doctor’s care flew out the window when he considered that he had become a doctor for *those* reasons. He really wanted to hit the emergency call button.

“Hm? Just so we don’t have any misunderstandings, I’d rather play around than be played around with, all right? And rather than the operating table, I’d rather it be the delivery tab—”

“I’d rather not hear about your obsessions...Wait, I mean, shut the hell up! Quit making weird gestures as you explain it! Why isn’t a nurse taking care of me!?”

His hand really went for the nurse call button this time.

The doctor gave a dejected look, left him with an “I’m leaving”, and went out of the hospital room.

(Why do I get the feeling that he looked really disappointed...)

Someone else came in as a replacement.

“It was the man ridiculously ill-suited for modern Japan, Stiyl Magnus.

“I have no interest of cooperating with you for the moment or to make friends. I just, well, came to check up on you.”

“...Wait a second. I, Kamijou Touma, would seriously and respectfully like to throw a question out there. How and why the hell are you just gallivanting about?”

Stiyl groaned and scowled in sincerity, then fell quiet.

If there were a need to compare injuries, then there was probably no person injured grosser than he was.

His body was filleted into small pieces of flesh, but he was still alive. His blood vessels had remained intact and his blood still circulated to his exposed organs. That was a pretty unique experience.

“Well, I was thinking about thanking you for your assistance, but...when I think about it, this whole thing was absurd. All you ended up doing *was making Aureolus self-destruct.*”

“Heh. That’s all thanks to the wonderful acting abilities of Kamijou Touma.”

That’s right. Kamijou Touma didn’t have the power to defeat Aureolus Izzard.

However, Aureolus used magic that would warp reality to align with his thoughts. In that case, things were easy. He just had to get Aureolus to think a certain way...

To make him think that *Aureolus Izzard could absolutely not win against Kamijou Touma.*

That's what his big bluffing scheme was for...Well, in all honesty, Kamijou didn't remember much about what happened after his arm was severed. It was more like his brain was going haywire from all the pain and shock rather than him consciously thinking that he needed to act. Excessive blood loss was said to be linked to sexual arousal by suicide enthusiasts, so that was probably the cause of his mad cackling.

But he didn't breathe a word of that. When humans wanted to look cool, they would do it with everything they've got.

"But, man, it's crazy we both lived through that. I had an arm cut off, and you were a flesh planetarium! I feel like I've been beholden to the mysteries of the human body...Hey, wait. Why are you grinning to yourself?"

"No, no. Listen to you—seems you didn't notice my help." Stiyl's grin was cocky, like he was purely making fun of him. "You stood still and dodged Aureolus's bullets twice after your arm got cut off. How on earth do you think that happened?"

"...Huh?"

"It's true that your act fooled Aureolus completely. But there was no way your bluff would sink in right away, right? Twice, after your arm was cut off and you started your comedy routine. Wasn't it because you effortlessly avoided his attacks that he started to believe in you?"

"...Umm."

Kamijou stared blankly at Stiyl like a fool.

"You still don't understand? Let me spell it out for you. Aureolus's first two attacks didn't fail because your bluff was working. I simply used magic to screw with Aureolus's sense of distance."

"What...!?"

Kamijou was startled.

"Is it that surprising? My specialty is fire. It's really not difficult to make a heat mirage, change where the light gets refracted, and blur his vision," he explained like it was a trifling matter.

"No, not that! I'm not surprised about that! You were a flesh planetarium at the time, floating in the air! You were still able to use magic like that!?"

"Flesh planetarium, eh? Quite a merry way of putting it...But there's no real problem, is there? I was still alive at the time, so there's no reason I couldn't temper my life force to refine it into magic power. Fortunately for me, the rune cards I had hidden scattered everywhere when my body exploded, too."

Kamijou stared at him, flabbergasted.

The incidents had involved vampires and Deep Blood...This guy here wasn't the—couldn't have been the biggest monster of them all, could he?

"*Leaving pointless things like that aside*, I figured you'd want to hear about your own charges, too. I just came here to explain what happened after Misawa Cram School."

His charges.

Kamijou looked at his right hand, wrapped in a cast. The dragon's jaw. It was nothing more than self-destruction born from Aureolus's anxiety, but he was driven to self-destruction by none other than Kamijou himself.

"Oh, there's no need for faces like that. Aureolus apparently imagined that dragon king to be something mental, rather than something physical. The point is that he accidentally imagined some kind of ghost, which would take his soul without touching his body, or something like that."

"???"

"To put it simply, you didn't injure his body at all. On the other hand, that means you destroyed Aureolus Izzard's mind *without injuring him at all*."

"...Is that supposed to be praise?"

"Of course it is. In short, you resolved the entire situation just by stealing Aureolus Izzard's memories. This was a team battle against an alchemist holing up in a stronghold, and yet the only casualty was the one from the Thirteen Knights by the elevators. That's only the third time something like this has ever happened in the entire two-thousand-year-long history of magic."

(Should I be happy about that?)

Kamijou suddenly remembered something. He didn't think the Roman Catholic Church's Gregorian Chant had gotten through unscathed. Stiyl might not remember it, since his own memories were erased at the time.

"...And? What happened to Aureolus Izzard after he lost his memory?"

(He couldn't possibly be in the same hospital as us, right?)

"Oh, that's simple. I killed him."

Stiyl Magnus answered outright, with such brevity that Kamijou thought he misheard him.

“What are you making that face for? Listen up. Aureolus Izzard betrayed the Roman Catholic Church and converted to alchemy. He made an enemy out of Academy City the instant he confined Deep Blood and made Misawa Cram School into a fortress, plus he’s got a bounty on his head for the forces that took on Misawa Cram School and ended up being defeated themselves...And, of course, Index and I—rather, the witch-hunting specialists in Necessarius—have gotten their own orders, too.”

Stiyl was speaking with irritation, possibly because he wasn’t allowed to smoke in the hospital ward.

“Look. After making enemies out of this many different worlds, and with his memories gone, could Aureolus Izzard really have opposed them? No—he wouldn’t remember anything in the first place, and without anything to protect, do you think he would have the willpower to keep on living with the whole world against him?”

“...”

“Aureolus wouldn’t be killed easily. Reprisals are one thing, but on top of that, he’s the first person in the world to succeed at Ars Magna. Of course, many organizations trying to search for that secret method would come looking for Aureolus to torture him—and the worst part is that since Aureolus lost all his memories, *he’d never even be able to cough it up*,” said Stiyl with annoyance. “Look. All Aureolus had left to him was either death or a hell worse than death. If I were told to pick one, I’d recommend the former without skipping a beat.”

However, Kamijou still couldn’t accept it.

“I can’t...agree with that. Of course I can’t. Even if that was the only way...If there’s such a thing as a world where people laugh together by taking the lives of others, than why the hell did we even go to that stupid Misawa Cram School in the first place!?”

That’s right. Kamijou had motivation to fight because he couldn’t agree with something. Deep Blood was treated like a playing card, the students were used and thrown away like cogs for the Gregorian replica and Limen Magna, and Aureolus had tried to kill Himegami just to lash out with the anger he couldn’t endure. Kamijou tried to move onto the battlefield without running away from it because he couldn’t forgive the bastards who thought nothing of human lives, and yet...

If, at the very end of it all, he acknowledged someone’s death as right...

...Then Kamijou couldn’t bear the guild from wielding a fist himself.

“...”

Besides, Aureolus was definitely an unforgivable bastard, but he didn’t think he was completely worthless as a human being.

Because if things had really gone according to Aureolus's plans...

Then the reason Index hadn't turned back to look at Aureolus was because *he never wanted to "revise" her*, even if it meant he was rejected. That would have been the alchemist's final act of humanity.

"That's why you're naive," said Stiyl Magnus disinterestedly, looking away. "I said 'kill', but the word has meanings other than taking someone's life, you know."

"Huh?" Kamijou looked at Stiyl.

Stiyl, in a really bored-sounding voice, without linking eyes, continued, "Listen up. Aureolus Izzard lost all his memories. What if, in this situation, I were to do a little bit of cosmetic surgery and change the construction of his face? The outside would be different and so would the inside. Look, that person honestly isn't Aureolus Izzard anymore. There's no difference between doing that and killing him, is there?"

".....Are you actually a good guy?"

"What's that supposed to mean? I'll have you know that I'm still an Anglican priest. My specialty is fire, so reconstructing someone's face is an easy feat. I just have to melt it and then fix it back up.

".....You're really a great guy!"

"Hm? Well, I guess that was an unexpected response, but...Wait, what!? What are you suddenly trying to hug me for!? Stop trying to stand on your tiptoes and pet my head like that!"

As Kamijou and Stiyl raged about the room, kicking and struggling, suddenly the hospital room's door opened without anyone knocking and in burst Index.

"Touma! They're selling cantaloupe-flavored potato chips at the store! They're rare and I want to buy them, so I think I might want some money! ...Er..."

Index abruptly stopped moving.

In front of her were the struggling runic magician and Kamijou Touma, currently trying to pet his head against his will because he was impressed with something.

All three of them stopped.

The world froze.

"...Touma. Sorry for interrupting you."

“W-wait. This is strange. Why are you looking away? Hey, don’t just leave without responding!!”

Kamijou shrieked and desperately tried to pull back Index before she left. Well, he got the premonition that telling Index, “No, really, I’m very attracted to your childlike body so don’t worry!” would *also* be pretty socially unacceptable. Kamijou’s mind collapsed into a wormhole of confusion.

“...”

Stiyl Magnus watched the two of them.

Kamijou and Index were in a heated debate, but it somehow looked like they were enjoying themselves.

It was like the two of them just being there was incredibly natural.

Stiyl Magnus watched the two of them.

Not out of envy nor out of animosity. It was just because he had come all this way to protect Index so she could smile like that. He gazed at the face of the girl he had to defend with a satisfied expression.

Then he sighed. “I’ve got jobs piling up for after this, so I should be leaving.”

Stiyl’s tone of voice was one of boredom, but his face looked somewhat fulfilled.

Index looked at Stiyl once again and quickly hid herself behind Kamijou. She stared at him like a detective trailing a suspect from the shadows.

Stiyl went for the room’s exit without having any particular feelings on the matter.

He chose to come all this way so she could be like that.

“Umm...”

Right before Stiyl turned the room’s door handle, Index spoke up.

Stiyl turned back. Index was probably angry. Stiyl *was* the one that got Kamijou Touma wrapped up in the Misawa Cram School incident. There was no other reason she wouldn’t heap all manner of abuse on him.

“Well, I’ll just say it. Thanks.”

And yet, that’s what she said.

“After all, if Touma knew the building was like that, he’d definitely have gone diving in by himself. So I think it was a good thing you were there. So—um, what’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing.” Stiyl smiled.

He didn’t say anything more. Stiyl turned back to the exit again and left without a word.

For some reason, Kamijou got the feeling that was the first time he’d seen Stiyl smile.

“Touma.”

Kamijou returned his eyes from the doorway to Index. When he did, Index puffed out her cheeks and looked at him, possibly somehow mad at him for not paying attention to her.

He grinned at her in spite of himself. The battlefield in Misawa Cram School had certainly been fierce, but he had been able to make it back home. He smiled because that feeling hit him then.

But...A question he left in the war zone came to mind.

The thing that flew out of his severed right arm—the jaw of the dragon king.

It was nothing more than a product born of Aureolus Izzard’s anxiety toward Kamijou.

That was the logical analysis. But at the same time, *was Aureolus Izzard actually thinking something that specific*—that a transparent dragon jaw would spring out of his right arm?

Though the probability was low...

What if, just what if, that monster was unrelated to Aureolus’s power?

(...That’s impossible.)

However, Kamijou thought back to Himegami Aisa. Deep Blood, Himegami Aisa, was a girl with a special power that only worked against vampires.

If such a disturbance was caused by a girl *who could do nothing except kill vampires*, then if Kamijou Touma’s right hand, Imagine Breaker, could even kill the systems of God, then how much must it be worth?

No...

Just what *was* Imagine Breaker in the first place?

“Touma! I said, they’re selling cantaloupe-flavored potato chips.”

Index's words finally snapped Kamijou back to reality.

"Uh, right. I see...Wait, would cantaloupe-flavored chips be sweet?"

Kamijou tried to engage in the conversation that was going on and attempted a vague smile.

(This is fine for now. Whatever kind of weird power it was, I was still able to protect one girl through the whole thing. I can't ask for more than that.)

That's why things were fine for now.

For now.

♦

"Touma, Touma! Hey, you know how there was that person named Himegami Aisa in that building?"

Index suddenly began as they were walking down the hallway toward the shop.

"Ah, that Denpa Kei[7] who liked to pretend to be a magic-user? What about her? Wait, what is it, Index? What are you looking at me with suspicion for? You're the one who asked."

"...Touma, you fought for Aisa this time, weren't you? Not for me, but for Aisa!"

"What?"

Kamijou tilted his head, puzzled. Index was saying some weird stuff all of a sudden, and she somehow seemed really bothered about something—enough to *purposely show Kamijou* her making a pouty face.

"Nothing. It's nothing." After Index grumbled to herself a bit, she said, "Yeah. Well that Aisa person was actually admitted to this hospital. I just went and talked to her."

"Uh-huh," Kamijou said, throwing in an appropriate grunt to keep the conversation going.

(Now that she mentions it, what is Himegami going to do from now on?)

[7] 電波系 or Denpa Kei is similar to the term "Denpa Onna" used in the prologue, "kei" means someone who is an incredible fanatic of something, for example "Akiba-Kei" refers to someone who is in love with Akiba products (an otaku); in this case Denpa Kei means that Aisa loves to act strangely (denpa) with no apparent reason at all.

She didn't want to attract vampires, but the Misawa Cram School barrier doesn't exist anymore. Apparently, she could use a Walking Church like Index for it, but Aureolus Izzard was the one who promised to make one, and he was gone, too.

"So after talking to her about lots of stuff, Aisa is apparently gonna be looked after by the Church!"

"...I think I've managed to figure out how this is going to end, so can I just say it first?"

"Gah! Someone goes through all the trouble to do some storytelling and this is what she gets! Touma, saying the ending before the play ends totally kills it! Shakespeare would probably stab you, Touma!

"Quit saying people will stab me while you're smiling."

Kamijou took one single, quiet breath and threw out the answer that anyone at this point would have guessed.

"You're about to say, 'By Church, I mean the Walking Church!' right?"

AFTERWORD

To the readers who read the first volume: welcome back.

To the brave souls who suddenly picked up the second volume: welcome.

I'm Kamachi Kazuma.

Now then, the afterword. It seems like depending on the person, some of you read this part first. Apparently, the afterword is like a second summary. Or that there are people who read the afterword first, and if it tickles their fancy, they head straight for the cash register.

However, I'd like to advise caution to those of you who dive straight into the afterword. It would probably not be a good idea to read it until you've gone through the story first.

The next thing here is an afterword meant for those of you who enjoy reading the afterword at the end or those of you with the courage to brave spoilers.

The main concept behind this volume was a "bad end".

To put it clearly, Aureolus is Kamijou Touma's failed state. I tried to write this book while thinking about what kind of person Kamijou might have become if he hadn't succeeded at the end of volume 1. Even Himegami had the pitiful role of the girl who couldn't become the story's heroine.

So for various reasons, things were pretty brutal this time around. Contrary to volume 1, where even the enemies would at least hear you first, the final boss—to say nothing about the candidate for heroine—never listened to a word anyone said.

Ars Magna was the occult keyword everything developed from.

I mentioned somewhere in the story that it was the "true form of alchemy", but that was actually a total lie. Apparently, the first major school of alchemy, the Bohemian school (the one famous for turning lead into gold) appeared in the later stages of the Roman Empire, while Ars Magna didn't come in until quite a bit later, in the seventeenth century. In addition, at the time, the seventeenth century was kind of a dark age for alchemy. It was a fad, where fake magicians would con nobility out of their money. In other words, Ars Magna was just some new-age cult sort of thing that rode the tailcoats of the alchemy boom.

In fact, the goal of Ars Magna wasn't to create gold or make an immortal elixir. It was really only something like humans being an incomplete version of God, so if a human was to train and become "complete", then he could become a god. Obviously that all sounds like a mess of cultic hubbub, but as you can see the term "God" in there, you can tell that Christian culture got mixed into alchemy.

In the story itself, the spell Aureolus used that made everything in his head become reality was closer to the Zurich style of alchemy. This mixed the original alchemy with the psychology of Carl Jung; "doing alchemy in your head" is the gist of it.

There was another version of alchemy from Vienna, but that used some perverted techniques called sex magic, so it's not allowed in Dengeki Bunko (laughs).

One explanation for the abundant number of variations of alchemy is apparently that no one knew what it originally was, but the correct answer seems to go more like this: Alchemists would con royalty by saying they could convert lead into gold, but no matter how long they waited, they could never produce that all-important gold. To soothe the nobles that angered, they told all kinds of different lies.

I wrote quite a bit, but well, in the end, this is what I really wanted to say:

Despite all the investigation, the word "alchemy" isn't really used well, huh?

I might as well have given Index a bit more time onstage and mixed in some kind of "easy kitchen alchemy" plot. I wonder how that sort of deep theme would have done in the story.

Finally, I want to thank the related personnel in this story.

Miki-san, who's in charge of editing, is someone really intimidating who forced me to write an entire novel within seventeen days. I thank you for sticking with this book until the end, despite all the holes in it.

My illustrator, Haimura-san, is someone I've actually never met face-to-face before. It would sound cool if I called him my "invisible partner," but I really do want to meet him and give him my thanks. For now, I'll just practice it on paper: Thank you so much.

And to the readers who bought this book, thank you for your support. I hope that we can meet next time. At this point, let me put my pen down.

Misaka Mikoto didn't even have a chance to appear in this volume (tears).

-Kamachi Kazuma